

A Historical Analysis of Orang Asli History and Malayan Comparisons to Indigeneity Under Settler
Colonial States

Eden Quah

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Nazry Bahrawi

Rebakah Daro Minarchek

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Eden Quah

University of Washington

Abstract

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Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Nazry Bahrawi

Asian Languages and Literature

Politically charged conversations around indigeneity in Malaysia have been occurring since before the end of colonization, but research about the meanings of these conversations is still lacking. Additionally, historical analysis of Orang Asli people is underdeveloped, often relegated to a precursor on larger pieces discussing Islamization or resource management. Although these are important topics, the implication that a people do not have an independent history has been used against Indigenous peoples to justify colonization or support the myth of *terra nullius*. My paper seeks to provide an analysis of the comparisons used by Malaysians to settler colonial states like Israel, New Zealand, and most thoroughly, the United States. I analyze comparisons made both by politicians and those chronicled by newspapers to challenge the usefulness of comparison in Malaysian history. My paper also deals with the meaning of slavery historically in Peninsular Malaysia as a means to understand Orang Asli history and their relations with Malay peoples.

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Orang Asli or Malay?

This paper will deal with the issue of cross-colonial and post-colonial comparison in Malaysia. In Malaysian history and discourse, the specter of settler colonialism has prompted many Malaysians to compare the history of the Malays or Orang Asli to victims of other settler colonial states, most notably, the United States. These comparisons, to the United States, New Zealand, and Israel, are categorically flawed and used primarily to slander a political movement or ethnic group instead of building solidarity. Only one of the comparisons discussed in this article moves towards decolonization, and the motivations behind it are chiefly for economic benefit of the state, not the Indigenous people used in the comparison. This paper will describe the history of Orang Asli people in Malaysia, go through three comparisons made by Malaysians to settler colonial states with a focus on the comparison to Native Americans, and argue that comparison in the Malaysian case is used primarily for its provocativeness instead of its usefulness.

In “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity”, Rusalina Idrus criticizes Malays for making comparisons between themselves and America’s ‘Red Indians’, saying, “A more obvious comparison to ‘Red Indians’ today would be the Orang Asli, rather than the Malays.”¹ However, was there a point to the comparisons between Malays and ‘Red Indians’ or are Orang

¹Rusalina Idrus. “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity.” In *Melayu*, edited by Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied and Maznah Mohamad. NUS Press, 2012, 108-109.

Asli the more appropriate comparative subjects? Debates waged online between people advocating *ketuanan Melayu* or Malay supremacy and others arguing the centrality of Orang Asli and the supposedly immigrant status of Malays warrant a more thorough examination, both into the history of Peninsular Malaysia and an examination of the comparisons made to other settler colonial states like Israel, New Zealand, and the United States.

These comparisons are problematic because of the political dialogue surrounding these comparisons and the Malaysian state. Going forward, I will point out some of their flaws and oversights that make their political messages dishonest from a historical perspective. My claims in this paper are not that Malays or Orang Asli are not Indigenous historically, but that the historical contexts make the historic usage of the term ‘Indigenous’ complicated at best. This is not to dismiss comparisons Malays and Orang Asli have made between themselves in regard to their modern economic marginalization, but instead to argue that a historic understanding of one group as always or never Indigenous is inadequate.

My research will begin with preliminary background information in “Setting the Stage,” followed by my sections discussing comparison. “Colonial Comparisons” will discuss some other examples of cross-colonial comparison and imagining the future of their own people in relation to other, less fortunate colonized peoples. The paper then takes a break to discuss my positionality. Then it will introduce some historical examples of Malaysians comparing themselves to ‘Red Indians’, followed by analyzing the Native American, Māori, and Palestinian comparisons today and their meanings. I will conclude this section by evaluating the comparisons and their inadequacies. The bulk of my analysis of comparisons will be focused on the Native American/’Red Indian’ case because it has a longer history and more extensive use. After this section, I will discuss the history of Orang Asli people in Peninsular Malaysia as well

as how the history fits into global models of indigeneity. I will then apply analysis to the history of the word ‘Sakai’ and the meaning of Orang Asli slavery in a longer historical narrative. The penultimate section will discuss possible expansions and limitations of my research, finishing with a concluding section “Against Comparison” where I make the argument that comparisons made to settler colonial states in the Malaysian case have been used unproductively, and that productive comparisons would focus on settler colonies with more similar experiences like Hawai’i, rather than more famous examples like the continental United States.

Setting the Stage

Before beginning our analysis of the history of Orang Asli people, there are a few definitions that require clarification. Malaya refers to Peninsular Malaysia currently under the Malaysian government, in essence all but the states on the island of Borneo that existed between 1948 and 1963. Malaysia refers to the union of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak, and at certain times Singapore. Indigenous, as defined by the “Working Paper on the Concept of Indigenous People” by its Chairperson-Rapporteur Ms. Erica-Irene A. Daes, means people who have,

- “a) Priority in time with respect to occupation and use of a specific territory;
- b) voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, which may include aspects of language, social organization, religion and spiritual values, modes of production, laws, and institutions;
- c) self-identification, as well as recognition by other groups, or by state authorities as a distinct collectivity, and
- d) an experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these conditions persist.”²

² Nicholas, Colin, Center for Orang Asli Concerns., Jenita Engi., and Yen Ping Teh. 2010. *The Orang Asli and the UNDRIP: From Rhetoric to Recognition*. Subang Jaya, Malaysia: Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 14.

The question of who are ‘the’ Indigenous people of a modern nation state is a question fraught with political implications and maneuvers. In modern Malaysia, there are three groups that claim the term ‘Indigenous’: the Malays, which are the majority ethnic group, the Dayak peoples, who live almost exclusively in the states of Sabah and Sarawak, and the Orang Asli who live almost exclusively in Peninsular Malaysia.³ For the purposes of this research, we will only be exploring identities to Peninsular Malaysia, also known historically as Malaya. This is not an official term used today, but it is useful to note that I am not referring to Sabah and Sarawak which have different historical contexts. While most Malays identify as Malays, Orang Asli typically identify primarily with their tribe or ethnic group.⁴ The term Orang Asli was an invention of the Malayan and later Malaysian state used to win over the myriad of peoples living in the jungle by giving them the most direct claim to indigeneity.⁵

Malaysia today is composed of Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other native people.⁶ Today, the Malays are 50.8% of the population of Malaysia, the Chinese are 23.8% of the population, the Indians are 7.2%, and the other Indigenous people, primarily the Indigenous people (Dayak groups) of Sabah and Sarawak are 11.8% of the population.⁷ However, at the beginning of Malaysia’s (and Malaya’s) history as an independent state, Chinese and Indian people outnumbered the Malays.⁸ Each one of these categories is a cultural construction, and ‘the Malay’- is a government construction.⁹ Internal variation and diversity is secondary to belonging

⁴ Endicott, Kirk M., ed. 2016. *Malaysia’s Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*. Singapore: NUS Press, 5.

⁵ Rusalina Idrus, Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, and Maznah Mohamad. 2012. “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity.” In *Melayu*, 101-. NUS Press, 105.

⁶ Endicott, Kirk, *Malaysia’s Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*, 2.

⁷ “Malaysia (08/05),” U.S. Department of State, August 2005, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/malaysia/47502.htm>.

⁸ Rusalina Idrus, “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity”, 109.

⁹ Andaya, “Orang Asli and the Melayu in the History of Peninsular Malaysia,” 23.

in a category; for example, a person might be Tamil or Bengali or Punjabi, but their most important identity is being Indian.¹⁰ It does not matter if a person identifies their nationality as Indian, Pakistani, or Bengali; what matters is that they are of the Indian race.

The Malays claimed special privileges over Indians and Chinese people based on their indigeneity to Malaysia as opposed to Indian and Chinese perceived foreignness. Malays compared their situation to the ‘vanishing’ ‘Red Indian’ in the United States.¹¹ Orang Asli have been used as a rhetorical device by some Chinese Malaysians to thwart Malay’s claims to special privileges due to Indigenous status. Because of this, it bears repeating that Malays are not ‘foreign’ or ‘non-Indigenous’ to Peninsular Malaysia¹². Indigeneity in Malaysia exists on a spectrum, and Malay claims to being native, if not Indigenous, to Peninsular Malaysia are legitimate. Malays, Dayak peoples, and the myriad of diverse peoples who fall under the umbrella of Orang Asli are Indigenous to Malaysia.

In 2017, Orang Asli people were tallied at 198,000 people, or .7% of the population.¹³ These 198,000 people belong to 18 ethnic groups or tribes (*suku* in Malay).¹⁴ These 18 tribes are sometimes grouped officially into three categories, the Negritos, the Senoi, and the Aboriginal Malays.¹⁵ The first migration to Peninsular Malaysia happened 25,000 years ago, though it is unclear if any descendants remain from this initial migration. The next migrations of people into

¹⁰ Manickam, Sandra Khor. 2015. *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*. Honolulu: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with University Of Hawaii Press, 108.

¹¹ Idrus, Rusalina, “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity,” 108.

¹² “Indigenous World 2020: Malaysia - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs”. www.iwgia.org. Retrieved 18 May 2025.

¹³ ““Indigenous World 2020: Malaysia - IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs”.

¹⁴ Gianno, Rosemary. 2023. “Temoq, Semelai, Semaq Beri and Jakun: Using Orang Asli Ethnonyms to Reconstruct Orang Asli Ethnohistory.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore)* 54 (2). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 271–97. doi:10.1017/S0022463423000309, 271.

¹⁵ Nicholas, Colin, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs., and Center for Orang Asli Concerns. 2000. *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*. Copenhagen, Denmark: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.

Peninsular Malaysia took place approximately 8,000 years before the common era. The people from this migration practiced hunting and foraging. The next migration took place about 2,000 years before common era, and the people from this migration introduced permanent agriculture, swidden agriculture, and some forms of wage labor. These people also brought the Mon-Khmer languages to the peninsula, which now are spoken by even the descendants from the first migrations to the peninsula. The last major pre-historic migrations to Peninsular Malaysia happened between 1,000-and 0 years before the common era. These people brought coastal and river fishing, more forms of wage labor, rice cultivation, and the Austronesian languages.¹⁶ These four migrations of people make up who today are classified as Orang Asli. While the groups may roughly match up to the three groups of Orang Asli: the Negritos, Senoi, and Aboriginal Malays, those are not absolute categories. Those categories persist from a time of racial categorization in British anthropology, and even the anthropologists at the time admitted that the categories overlapped and had fuzzy edges.¹⁷ Although they are based on outdated racial science, the terms Negrito, Senoi, and Aboriginal Malay are official terms used by the government.¹⁸

Colonial Comparisons

Colonialism was such a globalizing process, and coloniality so ubiquitous, that many nations compare themselves to other colonized nations. Nationally and internationally famous Puerto Rican singer Bad Bunny's "LO QUE LE PASÓ A HAWAII" compares Puerto Rico,

¹⁶ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 4.

¹⁷ Manickam, Sandra Khor, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, 1

¹⁸ Erni, Christian. 2008. *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: A Resource Book*. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 407.

currently a United States territory, to Hawai'i, a former territory now incorporated as a state. The chorus of the song warns against Puerto Rico becoming 'like Hawai'i', presumably with its 'native' population now a minority in their own country. Native Hawaiians, on the other hand, have in the past been compared to and compared themselves to Native Americans, whose fate they wished to avoid.¹⁹ In Malaysia, the image of the 'Red Indian' as well as other people under settler colonization has brought about much discourse as to Malaysia's place during colonialism, decolonization, and the new post-colonial world order.

Peninsular Malaysia's experience with settlement is sometimes defined as settler colonial.²⁰ The term 'settler colonial' is contentious in the Malaysian context because the waves of settlement do not match the most famous settler colonies like the United States, New Zealand, and Israel. However, this has not stopped comparisons, possibly even encouraging comparisons as a form of libel towards a group, but also these comparisons can be constructive in understanding people's place in a post-colonial world order.

Settler colonialism is the displacement of Indigenous peoples by a state seeking Indigenous people's lands for its own citizens. Although not inherently genocidal, it is an eliminationist logic.²¹ What this means is that although the internationally recognized crime of genocide may not have occurred, attempts at eliminating or reducing the population must for settler colonialism to function. For example, assimilationist efforts by the state are not always legally speaking genocidal, but they work to eliminate an ethnic or religious group. Commonly

¹⁹ Chang, David A. *The World and All the Things upon It: Native Hawaiian Geographies of Exploration*, (1st ed. University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 227-228.

²⁰ Gee, John. "Israel Perpetuates Settler Colonialism." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (Washington) 40, no. 4 (2021): 22-23.

²¹ Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (4). Routledge: 387-409. doi:10.1080/14623520601056240, 387.

cited settler colonies are the countries of the American continents, Australia, Israel, and New Zealand. Settler colonialism has also been observed in other cases, some who share a large coolie-descendant population, like in Hawai'i where Asian Americans make up the settler class.²²

Wolfe creates a dichotomy of racialization, which is easiest summarized using the United States as an example. Black people in the United States are categorized using the one-drop' rule, which created and maintains a self-sustaining and growing racialized class that are used for cheap or free labor. Native Americans in the United States is categorized using "blood quantum", a system that is designed to construct a diminishing population whose land and resources can be easily plundered by the state or private actors.²³ In essence, one population is racialized to expand its populations (via the 'one-drop rule') because their labor is valuable and one is racialized to diminish because their existence is inconvenient, and their land is valuable. Understanding this model of settler colonial theory, we will analyze the historical comparisons utilized by Malays who understood themselves as being similar to the 'Red Indians.'

Historical Comparisons

The 'Red Indian' was a popular comparison for Malays living in British Malaya historically, who saw themselves being pushed out of 'their land.' The Independence Party of Malaya (IPM) advocated for citizenship for all races, including non-bumiputra groups like the Chinese and Indians. Bumiputra means 'sons of the soil' and is a term meant to distinguish Malays, Dayaks, and Orang Asli from the more recent arrivals: the Chinese, Indians, and other

²² Fujikane, Candace, and Jonathan Y. Okamura. *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i*, (1st ed. Edited by Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura. University of Hawaii Press, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824861513>.

²³ Wolfe, Patrick. *ibid.*, 388 and 394.

‘immigrants.’²⁴ In response, many Malays felt threatened, one even wrote to the newspaper that Malays would be, “reduced to the status of the ‘Red Indians’ striving to live in the waste lands of America.”²⁵ This was because at this time, Malays had become a minority in Malaya and Singapore.²⁶ Ideas that they would disappear were held by many Malays, who saw themselves in the ‘disappearing’ ‘Red Indian.’

In an article for the newspaper *Majlis*, Malays were said to rather become “like the Red Indian” than unite as a race.²⁷ The historical comparisons with ‘Red Indians’ abound, with the famous Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir having used the comparison so much that it became known as the ‘Red Indian warning.’²⁸ How did Malays come to see themselves in ‘Red Indians?’ The answer, unsurprisingly, lies in British colonization. In “‘A Life of Make-Believe’: Being Boy Scouts and ‘Playing Indian’ in British Malaya (1910-42)”, Wu shows that scout programs indoctrinated Malayan youth into a British worldview as part of their education.²⁹ The scouting programs heavily borrowed from Africans and Native Americans, and activities were supposed to be “real romantic Redskin fashion” while behaving as “Purdy Redskins.”³⁰ This ‘playing Indian’ put Malaysians into the shoes of the other colonized people, Native Americans, or ‘Red Indians’ to them. Some Malaysians (of all races) even dressed as the British scouting perception of ‘Red Indians.’

²⁴ Erni, Christian, *The Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia: A Resource Book*, 404.

²⁵ Rusalina Idrus. “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity, 108.

²⁶ Schebesta, Paul. *Among the Forest Dwarfs of Malaya*. Hutchinson & co., limited, 1929, 13.

²⁷ Putten, Jan van der. “Negotiating the Great Depression: The Rise of Popular Culture and Consumerism in Early-1930s Malaya.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 21–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27751602>, 29.

²⁸ 1. Lim Kit Siang, “It’s Not Malays or Islam, but Malaysia That Is under Threat,” DAP Malaysia, November 25, 2014, <https://dapmalaysia.org/en/its-not-malays-or-islam-but-malaysia-that-is-under-threat/>.

²⁹ Wu, Jialin Christina. “‘A Life of Make-Believe’: Being Boy Scouts and ‘Playing Indian’ in British Malaya (1910-42).” *Gender & History* (Oxford) 26, no. 3 (2014): 589–619. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12090>,

³⁰ Wu, Jialin Christina, “‘A Life of Make-Believe’: Being Boy Scouts and ‘Playing Indian’ in British Malaya (1910-42),” 1-2.

The emphasis on the ‘red’ part as well paints a picture since the Native American (Onandaga Haudenosaunee) representative, Thomas Two Arrows, to the newly independent Malaya in 1957, insisted on not being called a ‘Red Indian.’³¹ Thomas Two Arrows provided a rationale for the name ‘Red Indian’ by saying that the red paint they sometimes wore represented sorrow.³² Malays may have identified with this sorrow and thus seen it as vital to their identification across the Pacific Ocean. The identification with ‘Red Indians’ was more to do with just sorrow, however, as Malays also found themselves increasingly on ‘Malay Reserves,’ places where Malays could only sell to other Malays, which is similar to the reserves in Canada or the reservation system in the growingly hegemonic United States.³³ These Malay Reserves were designed to stop Chinese encroachment into areas occupied by Malays as well as tie the Malays to agriculture. Idrus writes, “The creation of Malay reserves ensured that the Malays were tied to the land as agriculture producers. Within the ‘plural society’ economic model, the Chinese were the businessmen, the Indians plantation workers, and the Malays farmers.”³⁴ Similarly, in the United States, Native Americans were not allowed to sell their land except to the United States government.³⁵ Reserves and reservations could serve a dual purpose both to limit the settler class’s power to expand and protecting, but more importantly assuaging, the Indigenous peoples. With this commonality, even with the term used, it is not surprising that the ‘Red Indian’ made an impact in the Malayan colonial imagination.

³¹ Wu, Jialin Christina, “‘A Life of Make-Believe’: Being Boy Scouts and ‘Playing Indian’ in British Malaya (1910-42),” 29.

³² “Indian Brave, Tom Two Arrows, Comes to Town,” *The Straits Times*, February 24, 1957, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19570224-1.2.49>.

³³ Rusalina Idrus. “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity,” 105.

³⁴ Rusalina Idrus. “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity,” 106.

³⁵ Case, Martin. *The Relentless Business of Treaties: How Indigenous Land Became US Property*. (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2019), 9.

This impact of ‘Red Indians’ on the Malaysian imagination of racial relations persists past early independence; in a 1991 article in the New York Times, a Malay man named Karim says, “We’re like your red Indians... This is our reservation, our place that the Chinese can’t take.”³⁶ The global popularity of Hollywood may have kept the image and comparison to the ‘Red Indian’ alive. My own connection to this comparison is important to acknowledge when considering my research, so I will now describe my positionality.

Positionality

When my mother came to the United States in the late 1990s from Malaysia as a student, the globalizing Internet did not have the same place it does today. She had to adjust to many aspects of United States society that were foreign to her. One of these was the word ‘Red Indian.’ My mother moved to South Dakota, a state with a high Native American population, and she was surprised to learn that ‘Red Indian’ was not the acceptable term for Native Americans.³⁷ She was especially shocked because her and her friends said, “We love the Red Indian in Malaysia.”

My mother worked with many Lakota people while I was growing up, and she would criticize nativist, xenophobic white people who would make statements against immigrants. She thought that because white people are settlers in the United States, if they want to keep the country safe from ‘immigrants,’ they should be the first ones out the door. This is similar to the recent controversy of the pop singer Billie Eilish who parroted the phrase “no one is illegal on stolen land” without advocating for Native Americans, merely using them to enhance her

³⁶ Margaret Scott, “Where the Quota is King,” (New York City, New York: *The New York Times* 1991), <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/17/magazine/where-the-quota-is-king.html?smid=url-share>.

³⁷ 1. U.S Census Bureau, “South Dakota QuickFacts,” Internet Archives WayBack Machine, September 11, 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040911075056/http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/46000.html>.

argument.³⁸ Interestingly, my mother would also push back against racism targeting Indian and Chinese people in Malaysia under the same idea, that Malays should give the land back to Orang Asli if they were so keen on kicking out the ‘immigrants.’ This happened also without concretely advocating for Orang Asli or Malay rights.

During my undergraduate career, I became interested in Native American and Indigenous Studies and pursued a minor in the program. When I shifted my focus to Southeast Asia, I decided to also look at the Indigenous peoples of Malaysia, whom my mother had told me about, particularly the Orang Asli. When I began my study of Orang Asli history, I assumed something analogous to Native American history, but Orang Asli and Malay history defy an easy comparison. However, this has not stopped people from trying, and in some cases encouraged it as a means of libel against a racial group.

I was born in South Dakota to a white father and a mother of mixed Malaysian Chinese and Peranakan descent. I grew up upper middle class, and I am writing at the University of Washington, Seattle as part of the master’s program in Southeast Asian studies. I completed an undergraduate degree in history with a minor in Native American and Indigenous studies at the University of Minnesota Morris. The shift from ‘Red Indian’ to ‘Native American’ for my mother’s own journey parallels a change in discourse in Malaysia.

The Native American Comparison Today

³⁸ Ben Sisario, “Stars Bring ‘ICE OUT’ Pins and Fiery Speeches to a Political Grammys, *The New York Times*, (2026) <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/02/arts/music/grammy-awards-ice-trump.html>.

Today, there has been a change in language in Malaysia toward the more appropriate ‘Native American.’³⁹ However, the discourse persists; Pak Helmi, a right-wing newspaper author, attempted to disprove a ‘viral’ Twitter comment by X user @nickelferal that says,

“Malays are not the aboriginals of this country. have [sic] you guys forgotten about the Orang Asal? 🤔 why [sic] do you guys sound like the typical white supremacist from America that claims the land is theirs when they have stole it from the Indigenous? get [sic] off your high horse man.”

@nickelferal was responding to a tweet by @Suhaimi38809004 that says, “Malays are aboriginal of this country. If you want your special privileges go back to your own country?”⁴⁰

Pak Helmi goes on to break down the reasons why the comparison is wrong, but it does show that the discourse of Malays as Indigenous or Orang Asli as Indigenous remains, and Native Americans reprise their role in the comparisons of today.

Pak Helmi’s analysis is interesting because much of the information is factually correct, but the political bent denies a difference between Orang Asli and Malay people in Malaysia. Although the history is complex, Orang Asli today fit more into the international model of indigeneity than Malays do. The utility of this international framing notwithstanding, Malays are considered Indigenous disputably, but Orang Asli are considered Indigenous indisputably.⁴¹ What this means is that there are papers like “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity” that dispute Malays as Indigenous people in Malaysia, but there are not scholars that dispute Orang Asli being Indigenous people.

³⁹ConsistentAd9840, “How Common Is ‘Red Indian’?,” r/malaysia, November 13, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/malaysia/comments/17ubjxy/how_common_is_red_indian/.

⁴⁰ Helmi Effendy, “Melayu Itu Sendiri Ialah Orang Asli,” The Patriots, February 28, 2025, <https://thepatriots.asia/melayu-itu-sendiri-ialah-orang-asli/>.

⁴¹ Helmi Effendy, 2025.

Helmi points to the Orang Laut's loyalty, assumed constant, to the Malay sultanates. Helmi's charge on the Orang Laut is interesting and complex because the Orang Laut are not just one group, but the term refers to several. Some of whom are Indigenous to Sumatra, and some of whom are Indigenous to Peninsular Malaysia. Additionally, the relationships the Malay sultanates had with each other could be complicated or even antagonistic. For example, the Melaka Sultanate, the ancestor that the modern Malaysian state draws its lineage to, was rivals with another sultanate, Pasai. Additionally, Melaka fought against an Orang Laut group to take the Riau-Lingga archipelagos.⁴² This especially does not disprove Helmi's point about the comparison because Native American tribes had complex relationships with Europeans and among themselves, some of them having alliances that lasted for centuries, and some of them warring for centuries.

This is, of course, not to endorse the original comparison. @nickelferal's comparison that classified the relationship between Malays and Orang Asli as the same or even comparable to the relationship between Native Americans and white Americans or Europeans is problematic at the least. Helmi goes on to point out that many Malays and Orang Asli share ancestry, and that ancestry goes back to over 60,000 years on Peninsular Malaysia. He also says that the relationship between Native Americans and Europeans was far from the relationship Malays had with Orang Asli because Europeans "murdered, wared, stole from, and raped Native Americans,"⁴³ unlike, we assume, the Malays with the Orang Asli.⁴⁴

⁴² 1. Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, 3rd ed. (London: Palgrave, 2017), 55-6.

⁴³ "membunuh, berperang, merompak dan merogol penduduk asal Amerika"

⁴⁴ Helmi Effendy, 2025.

Pak Helmi does discuss the issue of slavery, but he only brings up how Americans were crueler because they enslaved Black people and brought them across the Atlantic Ocean. Orang Asli peoples were not, we are to assume, enslaved by Malays. Helmi uses the word “memperhambakan” for enslave, but he implies it happened only to Africans. This is different from Akiya’s interpretation in the novel *Hamba: Sebuah Novel Sejarah oleh Akiya* [2013], [Slave: A Historical Novel by Akiya] whose back page summary says that the Orang Asli were synonymous with slaves.⁴⁵ It additionally works poorly with the histories of slavery of Indigenous peoples in the United States, or especially the Americas. *The Other Slavery* by Andrés Reséndez, chronicles this underexplored history of Native American slavery in the United States.⁴⁶

Another example of an implicit comparison to Native Americans today is from Kirk Endicott’s chapter in *At the Risk of Being Heard : Identity, Indigenous Rights, and Postcolonial States*, which includes a foreword by famous Native American activist Winona LaDuke and chapters about Indigenous peoples like Aboriginal Australians, Indigenous Mexicans, and Endicott’s chapter, “Indigenous Rights Issues In Malaysia” which chronicles the history and struggles of the Orang Asli peoples. Although the comparison to ‘Red Indians’ is the longest-lasting comparison, New Zealand’s growing soft power has brought up comparisons to the Māori.

The Māori Comparison

⁴⁵ Akiya. *Hamba*. Pusat Prihatinan Orang Asli, 2014.

⁴⁶ Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston, Massachusetts: Mariner Books, 2017), 1.

The Māori are the biggest Indigenous people of Aotearoa or New Zealand. They are about 19.6% of the population, and they derive most of their rights from the Treaty of Waitangi, a treaty signed by Māori leaders and the British Crown in 1840.⁴⁷ Today, the Māori are seen as a shining example to other Indigenous people for the rights they have, particularly their language reclamation efforts are admired across the world.⁴⁸ Because of this and other factors, they have a burgeoning field of Indigenous tourism.⁴⁹

Today, Māori decolonization efforts have centered around the Treaty of Waitangi.⁵⁰ The Treaty remains an important legal document, as it is the basis for the founding of New Zealand and the place of settlers or Pākehā.⁵¹ There is no treaty like this in Orang Asli history, but nonetheless, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi called not only for a comparison between the Māori and Orang Asli, but instead using the Māori as a model for Orang Asli policies and, most importantly, tourism.⁵² If we are to follow Tuck and Yang's argument that decolonization is not a metaphor, then this change in policy is not progressive at all. Māori scholars also write that decolonization in Aotearoa or New Zealand is not a metaphor.⁵³ However, the rhetoric is exciting for Indigenous rights; Zahid asks for modeling the New Zealand approach based on increasing "land ownership rights, more inclusive access to

⁴⁷ "2023 Census Population Counts (by Ethnic Group, Age, and Māori Descent) and Dwelling Costs," Stats NZ, May 29, 2024, <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/2023-census-population-counts-by-ethnic-group-age-and-maori-descent-and-dwelling-counts/>.

Ocean Ripeka Mercier and Mike Ross, *Imagining Decolonisation* (Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books Ltd, 2020), 3.

⁴⁸ Aroha Awarau, "The Māori Saved Their Language from Extinction. Here's How.," Culture, June 2024, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/maori-language-nest-model-new-zealand>.

⁴⁹ "Tāpoi Māori Aotearoa New Zealand Māori Tourism," New Zealand Māori Tourism, January 25, 2026, <https://maoritourism.co.nz/>.

⁵⁰ Ocean Ripeka Mercier and Mike Ross, *Imagining Decolonisation*, 15.

⁵¹ Ocean Ripeka Mercier and Mike Ross, *Imagining Decolonisation*, 3.

⁵² Malay Mail, "Inspired by Rotorua, Zahid Says Maori Village's Success a Model for Orang Asli Tourism Hub in Melaka," Malay Mail, July 15, 2025, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/07/15/inspired-by-rotorua-zahid-says-maori-villages-success-a-model-for-orang-asli-tourism-hub-in-melaka/184023>.

⁵³ Ocean Ripeka Mercier and Mike Ross, *Imagining Decolonisation*, 16.

education, and the establishment of dedicated financing agencies to support Indigenous entrepreneurship.”⁵⁴

How are we to read this comparison? What does modeling reforms or restructuring after New Zealand mean? For Colin Nicholas, the founder and coordinator of the Center for Orang Asli Concerns, the position of Māori in New Zealand’s constitution is admirable and aspirational, but simply emulating New Zealand without input from Orang Asli risks just being a move for public relations without real change. However, if Orang Asli rights mirror Māori rights, it will be “one thousand times better.”⁵⁵ The comparison with New Zealand is twofold because on the one hand there is the aspirational recognition of land and cultural rights, but there is also the goal of ethnic tourism that uses Orang Asli to enrichen the Malaysian state, with Orang Asli concerns coming second in an act that was supposed to be for their benefit. Orang Asli can use their image as Indigenous peoples for their own financial benefit, such as with ecotourism.⁵⁶ The claims to indigeneity can also be used by Orang Asli to secure rights like under UNDRIP.⁵⁷ When the Malaysian state says that it will attempt to enshrine rights for Orang Asli based on the New Zealand model, it is important to look at the way that process will take place. Zahid also said, “I believe land rights are not merely about physical ownership. They represent dignity, the continuity of heritage and a key to the socioeconomic advancement of this community.”⁵⁸ This does acknowledge the complexities of ownership, but it also runs the risk of being a

⁵⁴ Ahmad Erwan Othman, “Govt Considers Adapting Maori Empowerment Model to Amend Aboriginal Peoples Act — Ahmad Zahi,” BERNAMA General, July 16, 2025, <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2445736>.

⁵⁵ Astro AWANI, “Consider This: ‘Sakai’ | Unpacking a Contested Term,” YouTube, July 21, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Clv3DdWEPGw>.

⁵⁶ Gan, Joo-Ee. “Ecotourism and Malaysia’s Orang Asli: The Social Construction of Indigeneity in Community Boundary-Drawing.” *Journal of Ecotourism* 21, 54.

⁵⁷ Nicholas, Colin, Jenita Engi., and Yen Ping Teh. 2010. *The Orang Asli and the UNDRIP: From Rhetoric to Recognition*, 108.

⁵⁸ Samantha Mythem, “Malaysia Looks to Aotearoa for Indigenous Rights Reform,” Intercontinental Cry, October 30, 2025, <https://icmagazine.org/malaysia-looks-to-aotearoa-for-Indigenous-rights-reform/>.

performative, spiritual ownership that allows the state to continue its economic interests with only performative gestures towards change. Although Aotearoa offers an aspirational model of settler decolonization, Israel offers a grim nightmarish comparison.

The Palestinian Comparison

Since its inception, Malaysia has supported Palestinian independence. Their support has been so overwhelming that Palestine Liberation Organization leader, Yasser Arafat, claimed that Malaysia was more supportive than Arab countries.⁵⁹ Malaysia's links to Palestine largely come from a feeling of Muslim solidarity, and they have translated into material support through the Boycott, Divest, Sanction (BDS) movement's prominence in Malaysia. However, this boycott has largely been limited to Malay Muslims in Malaysia.⁶⁰ Conversely, Chinese and Indian non-bumiputra non-Muslims are usually lukewarm on Israel and Palestine, considering it none of their country's business.⁶¹ Malaysia's neighbor Singapore, however, allows Malays to make more comparisons between Palestinians and themselves.

Singapore is sometimes known as the 'Israel of Southeast Asia' popularly, and Singapore has actually tied itself to Israel militarily. The main link in discourse, however, is their positions as settler colonies and in relation to a largely Muslim region. Jim Sleeper writes that, "both Israel and Singapore are non-Muslim countries facing much larger, less-than-friendly Muslim

⁵⁹ Mary Jane Ainslie, " Hamas Not as Hot in Malaysia as It Used to Be," Asia Times, December 6, 2024, <https://asiatimes.com/2024/12/hamas-not-as-hot-in-malaysia-as-it-used-to-be/>.

⁶⁰ Ahmad Tajudin, Bazlin Darina, May Chuen Eng, Nur Zahrawaani Jasmin, Nur Afni Halil, and Michelle Wong. 2025. "BRAND BOYCOTT AND ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR 2023: MALAYSIA MCDONALD'S AND STARBUCKS BRAND RESPONSE AND PERCEPTION". ADVANCED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SME'S (AIJBES) 7 (25). <https://doi.org/10.35631/AIJBES.725021>, 327.

⁶¹ Giora Eliraz, "Malaysia- A Surprising Statement in the Israeli Context," INSS, February 13, 2025, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/malaysia/>.

neighbors.”⁶² The other comparison is the position of the Chinese and Jews as minorities and economically advantaged over the ‘native’ populations.⁶³ The divide is so sharp, that Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim may have changed his view to be harder on Israel to increase his approval rating with ethnic Malays.⁶⁴

In 2025, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) leader and member of parliament Ahmad Marzuk Shaary made a Facebook post that called non-Muslims like Chinese and Indians similar to the Jewish immigrants who stole Palestinian land. PAS is an Islamist political party founded in 1951 with brief stints in power from 1973-1977 and 2020-2022.⁶⁵ Ahmad Mazruk Shaary faced intense backlash and calls to offer an apology, but he did not back down or issue an apology.⁶⁶ According to him, non-Muslims and non-bumiputra are “drafting laws, writing acts, and slowly mapping out the political power structure of this country” in Putrajaya.⁶⁷ Because of Malaysia’s history with settler colonialism, the image Singapore projects, and the intense support for Palestinians shared by many, particularly Malay Malaysians, this comparison was seen as extreme. However, it was not the only time Ahmad Marzuk made this comparison; he also said Malaysia could become a “second Palestine” at a public lecture.⁶⁸

⁶² Jim Sleeper, “The ‘Special Relationship’ Between Singapore and Israel,” Asia Sentinel Politics, March 28, 2024, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/special-relationship-singapore-israel>.

⁶³ Jim Sleeper, “The ‘Special Relationship’ Between Singapore and Israel.”

⁶⁴ Jim Sleeper, “The ‘Special Relationship’ Between Singapore and Israel.”

⁶⁵ Syaza Shukri and Muhammad Baihaqi Aminudin, “The Ulama Leadership Model of the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS): Perspectives of Key Leaders,” FULCRUM Analysis on Southeast Asia, December 28, 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-ulama-leadership-model-of-the-islamic-party-of-malaysia-pas-perspectives-of-key-leaders/>.

⁶⁶ Fernando Fong, “PAS MP Slammed For Comparing Malaysian Non-Muslims To Jewish ‘Occupiers’ Of Palestine,” TRP, October 24, 2025, <https://www.therakyatpost.com/news/malaysia/2025/10/24/pas-mp-slammed-for-comparing-malaysian-non-muslims-to-jewish-occupiers-of-palestine>.

⁶⁷ Fernando Fong, “PAS MP Slammed For Comparing Malaysian Non-Muslims To Jewish ‘Occupiers’ Of Palestine.”

⁶⁸ Fernando Fong, “PAS MP Slammed For Comparing Malaysian Non-Muslims To Jewish ‘Occupiers’ Of Palestine.”

The comparison with Israel and Palestine is perhaps one of the most haunting for Malaysians considering the importance of Israel and Palestine in the cultural imaginations of Malaysians, some of whom see themselves on the wrong side of an apartheid apparatus similar to that in Israel and some others seeing their lot as Indigenous peoples being pushed out by a money-wise settler population that seeks to destroy a Muslim way of life. The activeness and interpretation of these dynamics of course vary between different Malaysians, even those of similar racial or religious demographics, but there are self-evident reasons for comparison and self-evident reasons for alarm at these comparisons.

Evaluating the Comparisons

What is the accuracy of these comparisons? Is there any truth to them? While a breakdown of all the differences between the different colonial situations between the United States, New Zealand, and Israel is possible, it would not be particularly constructive. There are limits to comparative history, especially comparative history between more than two places. Additionally, it would be uncharitable at the least, and deliberately obtuse at the worst, to assume that those making the comparisons assumed everything was identical. I included a brief explanation as to some of the obvious reasons for comparison, but I want to additionally evaluate Orang Asli and Malay histories with settlement that is compared to settler colonialism.

History Before the British

Before the arrival of the first Malay states on the peninsula, the peoples of Peninsular Malaysia were involved in international trade stretching between African states in the west,

China in the east, and the Indonesian islands in the south.⁶⁹ The peoples of the peninsula traded forest goods like rattan, while other peoples like the Orang Laut (sea people), a term referring to several groups of nomadic peoples that worked as pirates, traders, and mercenaries throughout the Nusantara archipelago (modern Indonesia, Malaysia, and East Timor), traded goods from the sea like trepang.⁷⁰ The Orang Asli tribes probably varied in leadership like they do today. Today, some Orang Asli are led by headmen, and some are egalitarian without leaders. Historically, women also probably lead tribes, but today women are not recognized by the government as headmen even when they in practice lead a tribe.⁷¹ The Orang Asli had a dynamic history and interacted with historical empires in nuanced and mutualistic ways.

Malay history on the peninsula begins in the twilight of the Srivijayan Empire. Srivijaya was a Hindu-Buddhist state with its center on the island of Sumatra lasting from the 7th to the 14th centuries common era.⁷² It maintained a loose hegemonic empire over several centers of power in the strait of Melaka. It maintained a close relationship with the Orang Laut.⁷³ Srivijaya was under the suzerainty of China, similar to many other Southeast Asian states, and it traded both forest (*hutan* in Malay) and sea (*laut* in Malay) goods and worked as a middleman between the western worlds of Southwest Asia, Africa, and Europe, and the eastern world of the Chinese dynasties.⁷⁴ The Chinese dynasties used to prohibit private trade and only accept trade through tributary gifts from states it recognized as the only legitimate state in their given area.⁷⁵ Srivijaya

⁶⁹ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 11.

⁷⁰ Andaya, Barbara Watson, and Leonard Y Andaya. 2017. *A History of Malaysia*. 3rd edition. London: Palgrave, 16 and 99.

⁷¹ Baer, Adela S. 2006. *Orang Asli Women of Malaysia: Perceptions, Situations & Aspirations*. Subang Jaya, Malaysia: Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 31.

⁷² Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 24.

⁷³ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 16.

⁷⁴ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 40.

⁷⁵ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 29.

was able to maintain power partly through this recognition and exclusive trade relationship. Attacks from Javanese kingdoms like Singhasari, growing power by Thai states that exerted suzerainty over Kedah in Peninsular Malaysia, and waning loyalty from the Orang Laut brought on by Srivijayan impotence led to a gradual decline.⁷⁶

Malaysia's history is today framed through Islam, which obscures non-Muslim pre-colonial aspects of its history. The classic history of the modern Malaysian state traces itself to a runaway prince from Palembang who founded the Melaka Sultanate in the early 1400s.⁷⁷ This was not, however, the only Malay city on the peninsula. Kedah had existed for centuries before under the suzerainty of the Srivijayan Empire, and Perak and Patani also existed, albeit less relevant.⁷⁸ Langkasuka, Chi Tu, and the newly discovered site of Bujang Valley also existed before the Melaka Sultanate, though our sources on these sites are more archeological than historical.⁷⁹

Why then does the Malay narrative not begin with the earliest Malay states on the peninsula? Because Melaka was the first sultanate on Peninsular Malaysia. Modern Malaysia is not a secular state, but instead operates under some forms of sharia, and modern Malay identity in Malaysia is tightly intertwined and inseparable from Islam. Melaka was founded by a runaway prince from Palembang on an old Orang Laut village, and it was formed both with Malay refugees from Srivijaya and Orang Laut who followed the prince.⁸⁰ Melaka was founded where it was for many reasons; there was the defensibility of the region, the key strategic location

⁷⁶ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 33-36.

⁷⁷ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 47.

⁷⁸ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 28 and 40.

⁷⁹ Wheatley, Paul. *The Golden Khersonese: Studies In the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before A. D. 1500*. (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1961), v, <https://hdl-handle-net.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/2027/heb02477.0001.001l>.

⁸⁰ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 47.

between the Chinese dynasties, India, and Java, its access to fresh water from the Melaka River, and its key location as a place where tribes from the interior traded. Most trade with the non-Muslim interior tribes happened along a river, which eased transportation.⁸¹

Relationships with the non-Muslim peoples living in the interior of Peninsular Malaysia were essential to the growth of the Melaka Sultanate. Rulers of the early Malay states cemented their rule by marrying women from the non-Muslim interior tribes and the Orang Laut.⁸² Rulers from the non-Muslim interior tribes, called headmen, had important roles in the courts of Malay sultanates, and they were even considered on par with Malay rajahs.⁸³ A neighborhood in Melaka composed primarily of people from the non-Muslim interior tribes called Naning was overseen by a headman.⁸⁴ The settlement of Rembau was ruled by a headman from the interior despite having a mostly Malay population.⁸⁵ These headmen also acquired titles from Malay courts, like from the sultan in Negeri Sembilan.⁸⁶ The people from the interior tribes were known by many terms in the early days, either by a term specific to their ethnicity or tribe, or by a more general term like Orang Bukit, Orang Dalam, or Orang Benua.⁸⁷

The interior tribes provided access to resources only found in the jungle like rattan, petai, durian and resins, while the Orang Laut provided access to resources found on the sea like

⁸¹ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 45.

⁸² Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 72.

⁸³ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 75.

⁸⁴ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 75.

⁸⁵ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 74.

⁸⁶ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 75.

⁸⁷ Gianno, Rosemary, "Temoq, Semelai, Semaq Beri and Jakun: Using Orang Asli Ethnonyms to Reconstruct Orang Asli Ethnohistory", 279 and 282.

trempang.⁸⁸ The Malay states were built not just by being the middlemen between India and China but also by being the middlemen between non-Muslim interior tribes and the Orang Laut. During later colonial rule, people from the non-Muslim interior tribes were used to locate ideal mining areas, and they worked alongside Chinese workers.⁸⁹ Malays turned to the non-Muslim interior tribes for their mystical knowledge but also remained fearful of their powers.⁹⁰ The non-Muslim interior tribes were the crucial gatherers of the resources that economically sustained the early and later Malay states.

Who made up the population of these early Malay states? They were from their very onset multicultural. There were Javanese, Gujaratis, Minangkabau Malays who were matrilineal, patrilineal Malays, Chinese, and maybe most importantly, people from the non-Muslim interior tribes.⁹¹ These people were known as the Sakai, which at the time meant ‘subject.’⁹² The early Malay states relied on the willing assimilation of people from the non-Muslim interior tribes into a new Malay culture. Another group, the Jakun, were composed of people with mixed parentage, which was common (usually from Malay fathers and mothers from the non-Muslim interior tribes)⁹³. Later, Jakun would come to mean any of the people from the non-Muslim interior tribes who spoke a ‘Malay’ (i.e. Austronesian) language before eventually being replaced by the term Aboriginal or Proto-Malay.⁹⁴ Today, many people who identify as Malay, have heritage from the

⁸⁸ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 44-45.

⁸⁹ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 73.

⁹⁰ Nobuta, Toshihiro. 2008. *Living on the Periphery: Development and the Islamization of the Orang Asli*. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 15.

⁹¹ Andaya, Barbara, *A History of Malaysia*, 47.

⁹² Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 69.

⁹³ Gianno, Rosemary, “Temoq, Semelai, Semaq Beri and Jakun: Using Orang Asli Ethnonyms to Reconstruct Orang Asli Ethnohistory”, 281.

⁹⁴ Manickam, Sandra Khor, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, 104.

people from the non-Muslim interior tribes who either assimilated or married into Malay families.⁹⁵ This process happened the other way as well; the quasi-historical figure Hang Tuah was born into a tribe of Orang Laut, lived his life as a Malay, and retired and joined one of the non-Muslim interior tribes.⁹⁶ Today, many people from the non-Muslim interior tribes also have Malay ancestry; the headman of one tribe has only one fourth of his ancestry from non-Muslim interior tribes, one fourth from Muslim Malays, and one-half Chinese ancestry.⁹⁷

The relationship between the non-Muslim interior tribes and the Malay states, was not, however, strictly positive. Sakai, a term which formerly meant subject, later came to mean slave and be used derogatorily.⁹⁸ Sakai would later be replaced with the word Senoi, but it is telling that a group of non-Muslim interior tribes that composed roughly half of the Indigenous people became the ethnonym meant slave.⁹⁹ Translating it strictly as slave is problematic, and we will discuss this later. Malays called the people living in the interior *kaffirs* or infidels, and they practiced many slave raids.¹⁰⁰ This was, at least in part, motivated by Islamic rules prohibiting the enslavement of other Muslims, though the slave raiders may have sometimes been other opportunistic Orang Asli.¹⁰¹ The people from the non-Muslim interior tribes were also victim to punitive expeditions from sultans who resented perceived disloyalty.¹⁰² The people left after

⁹⁵ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 86.

⁹⁶ Andaya, Leonard Y. *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 186.

⁹⁷ Nobuta, Toshihiro, *Living on the Periphery: Development and the Islamization of the Orang Asli*, 15.

⁹⁸ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 69.

⁹⁹ Manickam, Sandra Khor, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, 264.

¹⁰⁰ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 70.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 71 and 78.

¹⁰² Endicott, Kirk, *Malaysia's Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*, 18.

Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 78.

Malay's slave raids and other attacks moved deeper into the jungle, isolating themselves.¹⁰³ This change from a complex relationship that involved slavery into a simplified, transactional relationship where the Malays saw the Orang Asli mainly or only as a source for slaves came about in the 19th century.¹⁰⁴ People from the non-Muslim interior tribes today are still fearful and traumatized by these Malay slave raids, though they were brought to an official end under the British colonial regime.¹⁰⁵

History of Indigeneity

What caused this fundamental change in relations? Even though they would eventually put a stop to the slave trade, the British actually also motivated the unequal relationship between the non-Muslim interior tribes and Malays living in the cities themselves. Under the British, people from the non-Muslim interior tribes came to be known as Aborigines, while all Muslims not of Chinese or Indian descent came to be the Malays.¹⁰⁶ The Aborigines also legally became wards of the sultan.¹⁰⁷ The Sakai group of tribes received reservations, much like the Malays did. Peoples outside of the one state with Sakai reservations, who were not Muslim, received no protections.¹⁰⁸ The development of a strong, Muslim Malay upper class also changed relations.¹⁰⁹

Gianno, Rosemary, "Temoq, Semelai, Semaq Beri and Jakun: Using Orang Asli Ethnonyms to Reconstruct Orang Asli Ethnohistory", 277.

¹⁰³ Baer, Adela, *Orang Asli Women of Malaysia: Perceptions, Situations, and Aspiration*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Rusalina Idrus, "Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity", 102.

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Rusalina Idrus, "Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity", 106.

¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁷ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Nobuta, Toshihiro. 2008. *Living on the Periphery: Development and the Islamization of the Orang Asli*. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Reid, Anthony, and Robert Moore. 2015. *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads*. 1st edition. Somerset: Wiley, 22.

Perhaps most importantly, the importation of Chinese and Indian workers eliminated the need for labor that was previously held by Aborigines.

It is important to be precise with the term ‘slavery’ here because although it seems like a singular term, it in actuality applies to a wide swathe of practices that hardly resemble one another. Before the latter half of the 19th century, Southeast Asia had, relative to places like India and China, a low population density. Because of this, the essential commodity to control for rulers was not land but people.¹¹⁰ Rulers gained and projected power primarily through controlling populations. Additionally, there was no free labor until the importation of Chinese workers, so acquiring slaves was the only way to gain power as a state. The eventual importation of Chinese workers, initially for mining, transformed the peninsula by making Chinese workers the new source of cheap/free labor as opposed to the Orang Asli.¹¹¹ This control was built using obligations, the obligation between slave and master and vassal and sultan was used to control both the interior tribes and the Orang Laut’s loyalty.¹¹²

Due to the importation of Chinese workers, The British policy towards Orang Asli during the early 20th century can be classified as ‘benign neglect.’¹¹³ As the interior tribes in Malaya retreated inwards to the mountains and jungles, they joined a pattern common throughout Southeast Asia in becoming ‘hill tribes.’ The hill people that James C. Scott describes in *The Art of not Being Governed*, including the Karen, Montagnards, Hani, Khmu, and Wa, are distrusted

¹¹⁰ Reid, Anthony, and Robert Moore. *A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads*. 1st edition. Somerset: Wiley, 2015, 23.

¹¹¹ Pan, Lynn. 1990. *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: A History of the Chinese Diaspora*. 1st U.S. ed. Boston: Little, Brown, 147.

¹¹² Andaya, Barbara Watson, and Leonard Y Andaya. 2017. *A History of Malaysia*. 3rd edition. London: Palgrave, 31.

¹¹³ Endicott, Kirk, *Malaysia’s Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*, 19.

by the lowland states of mainland Southeast Asia.¹¹⁴ During revolutionary struggle and early independence, they were often seen as a ‘fifth column’ and an obstacle to independence and national development.¹¹⁵ This is similar to the way that the interior tribes (then known as Orang Asal or Orang Asli) of Malaysia. Nomadic peoples are seen by states often as obstacles, and there are some legitimate concerns that nomadic peoples can bring for states. Nomadic peoples are harder to govern than settled populations. In *Seeing like a State*, Scott shows us an example in Tanzania, where the government tried to settle people into planned villages, not simply for control (as it was at least from the top, a voluntary settling), but also because it was easier to provide relief for famine, vaccinate rural populations, and provide health care in a timely manner.¹¹⁶ There is also a more selfish reason the state and its bureaucrats prefer settled populations; they are easier to control. Control is the main reason discussed in *The Art of not Being Governed* for the antagonism between lowland states and hill tribes.

Control here is a multilayered concept. Control means the ability to collect taxes first and foremost and the ability to enact consequences for failure to pay taxes or to capitulate other demands of the lowland state.¹¹⁷ For lowland peoples like those living in the Malays, Khmer, Burmese, Viet, Cham, and Thai states, they are vulnerable to state methods of coercion like destroying or confiscating farmland, being attacked by a military force, or being cut off from the economies of the cities.¹¹⁸ Hill people, on the other hand, make these methods of coercion difficult by not being tied to one piece of land, being too far for militaries to travel (or in too

¹¹⁴ Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 175.

¹¹⁵ Scott, James, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 20.

¹¹⁶ Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 224.

¹¹⁷ Scott, James, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 7.

¹¹⁸ Scott, James, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 90.

inhospitable terrain), and being independent of the lowland economies.¹¹⁹ Nomads are therefore implicitly distrusted by lowland states, and they are often thought of as not ‘belonging’ anywhere. However, in *Is History Fiction?*, Ann Curthoys turns this argument on its head when analyzing narratives about Aboriginal Australians,

“Australian Aboriginal spokespeople...passionately resent being characterized as nomadic by their European colonizers, a characterization they regard as a narrative reversal...Aboriginal people who remain on their own land as far as they are permitted become...the wanderers, while...European colonists and immigrants, who have crossed oceans and strayed far from their homelands...are named the settlers, those who stay at home, who always belong wherever they go.”¹²⁰

Curthoys asks us to consider the historical volatility of empires like the Persians as compared to relatively stable nomadic cultures like the Scythians, “agricultural societies...restlessly roam, waring, conquering, establishing colonies...losing colonies...expanding, contracting.”¹²¹ Scott invites us to think of hill populations as refugees fleeing from lowland states, especially the Chinese dynasties, but I think we should think of hill populations and nomadic people of the interior tribes as Indigenous regardless of their geographic ‘origin.’¹²² Indigeneity is not just defined by being ‘from’ a certain area but also by the relationship to the land and relationship to the dominant state. For example, under Spanish colonialism, all Filipinos (I am using this to mean the people living in the Philippines prior to European invasion, not the Spanish colonial term to mean a criollo from the Philippines) might be called ‘the Indigenous people’, but during Filipino history as a nation state, the term ‘Indigenous’ might not be applied to urbanites from Manila, as they are not living under the colonialism of a foreign power but instead to groups like the Igorot who live at the margins of

¹¹⁹ Scott, James, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 63.

¹²⁰ Curthoys, Ann, and John Docker. 2005. *Is History Fiction?* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 26.

¹²¹ Curthoys, Ann, *Is History Fiction*, 27.

¹²² Scott, James, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 120.

Filipino society in land that the state would prefer unoccupied or reoccupied. Patrick Wolfe defines indigeneity as a racialized identity of an ethnicity occupying land in his “Logic of Elimination.” Indigenous people are people targeted for ‘elimination’ whether through resettlement, ethnic cleansing, cultural assimilation, or genocide to free up their land and resources. Some of these processes are more overt, but others are more covert, but all serve the same aim of elimination. For example, in Thailand’s Isan region, pictures of the Thai royal family were disseminated to foster loyalty to them instead of the Laotian king.¹²³ States use some of or all these tactics to varying degrees to extract value from land occupied by an ‘uncooperative’ people.¹²⁴ Both the nomadic and semi-nomadic interior tribes of Malaya, the Orang Laut, and the hill peoples of Zomia have this antagonistic relationship with the state, and therefore, are Indigenous people.

The Emergency

The next changes in policy with the interior tribes after the era of paternalism come from the occupation of Malaya during World War 2. During World War 2, people in British Malaya ran a guerilla movement in the and highlands against the Japanese occupiers.¹²⁵ The interior tribes, having intimate knowledge of the land, including the ability to disappear into the jungles, were invaluable allies to the other Malayan resistance fighters. The communist fighters, however, did not give up their fight once the Japanese left and the British came back.¹²⁶ The interior tribes

¹²³ Carter, Paul T. “Thai Nation-Building: Assimilating Upcountry Peasantry to Develop Security,” 334.

¹²⁴ Wolfe, Patrick, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 387.

¹²⁵ Leary, John. 1995. *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*. In. Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 11.

¹²⁶ Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 12.

sided with the largely Chinese guerilla fighters by supplying them food, labor, intelligence, and men.¹²⁷ The communist guerillas won over the interior tribes partly by acknowledging their indigeneity above and beyond the Malay's by calling them 'Orang Asal', meaning 'original people.' The British and later Malayan governments countered by calling the interior tribes the 'Orang Asli,' which means virtually the same thing as 'Orang Asal.'¹²⁸

The British government created the Adviser of Aborigines and instituted resettlement campaigns, which were a total failure. Plagued by underfunding, disease, dirty water, and general ignorance, the resettlement efforts into designated forts of thousands of Orang Asli in the states of Perak, Selangor, and the borderlands of Perak and Pahang was disastrous.¹²⁹ An estimated five to seven thousand Orang Asli died because of disease and other related ailments caused by the hasty resettlements.¹³⁰ The resettlements were so disastrous, that many Orang Asli remarked that it would have been better for the Orang Asli to remain in the hands of the communists than in their shoddy forts.¹³¹ The disastrous conditions of resettlement were largely due to the Orang Asli's meager political pressure.¹³² The resettlement of Chinese squatters, a demographic that had the Malay Chinese Association to exert pressure on the colonial regime, by contrast, was much more successful and lacked the thousands of deaths that characterized the Briggs Plan for Orang Asli resettlement.¹³³

¹²⁷Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 80.

¹²⁸Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 6.

¹²⁹ Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 43.

¹³⁰ Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 44.

¹³¹ Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 42.

¹³² Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 42.

¹³³ Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 43.

The Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance of 1954 attempted to create ‘regroupment’ and ‘resettlement schemes’, to insulate Orang Asli from communist propaganda, and welcome Orang Asli into the larger Malay group.¹³⁴ Orang Asli were given reservations throughout Malaya, just like the Malays were given.¹³⁵ This eventually turned most Orang Asli to the side of the British and later Malayan governments, but it also exposed them to increasing violence by the Malayan Communist Party against the Orang Asli. The Malayan Emergency of 1948-1960 was characterized by violence onto the Orang Asli by all sides, treated as suspect by all parties.¹³⁶ This is not to say that Orang Asli did not participate in the violence; different tribes fought on different sides which changed as their circumstances changed, but the period was categorized by an intensified focus on the non-Muslim interior tribes, now called the Orang Asli, who were thrust into the national consciousness.¹³⁷

Present Day

Orang Asli people are now no longer just an afterthought in the public consciousness; they are a vital part of national security. Peninsular Malaysia received its independence from the British Empire in 1957, but conditions for the Orang Asli remained the same after independence.¹³⁸ Official state policy was geared towards assimilation by conversion to Islam, and the prizes the Orang Asli’s participation did ‘win’ were steeped in paternalist language and attitudes. Policy since the end of the Emergency and the beginning of the independent Federation

¹³⁴Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia* 81.

¹³⁵ Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 83.

¹³⁶ Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 72.

¹³⁷ Leary, John, *Violence and the Dream People: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960*, 1.

¹³⁸ Rusaalina Idrus, “Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity”, 107.

of Malaya has been geared towards freeing up the valuable land and resources that the Malayan/Malaysian state has hungered for since its inception.

What separates Orang Asli from the Malays with whom they used to be categorized with? The first answer is religion. Malays received reservations during the British colonial regime, but one of the defining features of who was “Malay” was being a practicing Muslim. This attitude carries forward to present day, where a Malay is legally defined in 1982 as, “one who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay custom.”¹³⁹ Orang Asli gain their distinctiveness as a separate group from the Malays because they do not traditionally practice Islam. The privileges and rights they enjoy as a group are as a non-Muslim bumiputra ethnicity/race.

Today, much of the policy regarding Orang Asli people is focused on the goal of eventual assimilation into the Malay race. Assimilation into the Malay race legally means several things: speaking *the* Malay language (the Riau-Johor dialect), practicing Malay customs, and most importantly, becoming Muslim.¹⁴⁰ Only one percent of Orang Asli remain semi-nomadic while the rest practice gathering, hunting, fishing, and farming as part of a relatively sedentary lifestyle.¹⁴¹ Most Orang Asli today are recognized as having no religion, as their Indigenous beliefs are not treated as a religion under the Malaysian state.¹⁴² ‘Islamization’ for the Orang Asli is tightly intertwined with ideals of modernization and progress. Orang Asli people are paternalistically admonished by Malay officials for continuing to practice their Indigenous

¹³⁹ Endicott, Kirk, *Malaysia’s Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*, 21.

¹⁴⁰ Endicott, Kirk, *Malaysia’s Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*, 21.

¹⁴¹ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia* 10.

¹⁴² Nobuta, Toshihiro. 2008. *Living on the Periphery: Development and the Islamization of the Orang Asli*, 16.

practices.¹⁴³ This kind of imposition of certain traditions to assimilate and modernize an Indigenous population are seen throughout the world. From the imposition of Christianity on Indigenous peoples in the Americas, to the imposition of Islam on Amazigh peoples in North Africa, religion as a sign of progression, modernity, and civilization, is a tale that finds parallels everywhere.¹⁴⁴

Why has there been such a push for the Orang Asli to adopt Islam and assimilate? There are parallels throughout global Indigenous history. The Malaysian state's quest for resources has fundamentally changed the historical relationship between Orang Asli and Malays. Today, the Orang Asli live on reserves as 'tenants at will', meaning that although it would take some amount of maneuvering the bureaucracy, Orang Asli land can be taken from them without their ascent.¹⁴⁵ The Malay state sees the Orang Asli similar to how other settler colonial governments view their Indigenous people, and its Department of Aborigines, which was succeeded by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA in Malay) was even modeled after organizations like the Bureau of Indian Affairs.¹⁴⁶ Chinese labor replaced labor from Orang Asli during the British colonial period, and today Indonesian, Bengali, and other migrant labor serves as the Malaysian state's source of cheap labor.¹⁴⁷ The expansion of the plantation economy has left the 88.7% rural

¹⁴³Nobuta, Toshihiro. 2008. *Living on the Periphery: Development and the Islamization of the Orang Asli*, 17.

¹⁴⁴ Scott, James, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 120.

¹⁴⁵ 1. "Indigenous Customary Land Rights and the Modern Legal System," Sahabat Alam Malaysia, March 18, 2022, <https://foe-malaysia.org/articles/Indigenous-customary-land-rights-and-the-modern-legal-system-5/>.

¹⁴⁶ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 107.

¹⁴⁷ 1. Aina Nasa, "More than 1.7 Million Foreign Workers in Malaysia; Majority from Indonesia: New Straits Times," NST Online, July 27, 2017, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/07/261418/more-17-million-foreign-workers-malaysia-majority-indonesia>.

Orang Asli in the sights of national and multinational corporations seeking to expand their businesses.¹⁴⁸

In the United States, even conservation can be used as a means of land theft as seen in the removal of Native Americans on the land that would become Yosemite National Park.¹⁴⁹ Orang Asli in Malaysia do not experience this same theft as conservation, as many live in places like the Belum-Temengor Forest Reserve.¹⁵⁰ Orang Asli relationships to the land and resources can present an obstacle for economic development. For example, until recently, the coveted Malacca cane was accessible to but not sold by Orang Asli people. Malacca cane is inaccessible and nearly extinct in Peninsular Malaysia, but Chewong Orang Asli people on the Krau Game Reserve were able to gather it but did not because of cultural taboos. Chinese traders attempted to coax Chewong people to gather it for them, but the Chewong refused.¹⁵¹ For Indigenous people like the Orang Asli, resources and land is not simply there for exploitation, which clashes with capitalist goals.¹⁵²

Islam may be what first separated Orang Asli from Malays, but it is not an absolute means of division. In the interest of gaining more converts to Islam, the definition of Orang Asli allows Orang Asli who convert to Islam to remain Orang Asli.¹⁵³ This throws a wrench in simplistic distinctions between Orang Asli and Malays. Among the Orang Asli, sometimes Islam

¹⁴⁸ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 17.

¹⁴⁹ Raymond Foxworth and Steve Dubb. *Invisible No More: Voices from Native America*. (Island Press, 2024), 139.

¹⁵⁰ Joo-Ee Gan, "Ecotourism and Malaysia's Orang Asli: The Social Construction of Indigeneity in Community Boundary-Drawing." (*Journal of Ecotourism* 21, no. 1 2022), 55.

¹⁵¹ ¹⁵¹ Baer, Adela S. 2006. *Orang Asli Women of Malaysia: Perceptions, Situations & Aspirations*. Subang Jaya, Malaysia: Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 76.

¹⁵² Colin Nicholas, Tijah Yok Chopil., and Tiah Sabak. *Orang Asli Women and the Forest: The Impact of Resource Depletion on Gender Relations among the Semai*, (Center for Orang Asli Concerns, 2003), 58.

¹⁵³ Gomes, Alberto, "THESEMAI: THE MAKING OF AN ETHNIC GROUP IN MALAYSIA," 104

is the sole separator. One Orang Asli group, for example, distinguishes themselves as people who eat pigs versus Malays, known as *gob*, who do not.¹⁵⁴ Converts from the tribe who do not eat pig are included as *gob* and considered to no longer be members of the tribe.¹⁵⁵ What then, ultimately separates Malays from Orang Asli? And is that separation indicative of a colonizing versus colonized relationship?

While dynastic China distinguished between barbarians with a ‘cooked’ versus ‘raw’ categorization, Malaya, beginning in the mid-1800s, distinguished between non-Muslim interior tribes with the terms ‘tame’ and ‘wild.’¹⁵⁶ This ‘tame’ versus ‘wild’ dichotomy was a method of simplification by the colonial British state that sought to distinguish between settled and nomadic populations.¹⁵⁷ There were also ‘civilized’ populations who were indistinguishable from Malays.¹⁵⁸ Though the categories of ‘wild’ and ‘tame’ come from the British, they originate from a Malay classification that saw populations as either *utan* (forest) or *jinak* (tame). Further classifications by the British divided populations into wild, tame, and Malay, a civilizational gradient.¹⁵⁹ Implicit in this classification is that one, many Malays are descendants of non-Muslim interior tribes and two, Malays are one of the original or Indigenous populations of the peninsula.

While Malays are defined by Islam, the religion of Orang Asli is unspecified. The definition of Orang Asli according to the Aboriginal Peoples Act of 1954 is,

¹⁵⁴Gomes, Alberto G. “THESEMAI: THE MAKING OF AN ETHNIC GROUP IN MALAYSIA.” In *Ethnic Diversity and the Control of Natural Resources in Southeast Asia*, edited by A. Terry Rambo, Kathleen Gillogly, and Karl L. Hutterer, 99–118. University of Michigan Press, 1988. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.19481>, 102.

¹⁵⁵ Gomes, Alberto, “THESEMAI: THE MAKING OF AN ETHNIC GROUP IN MALAYSIA,” 103-104.

¹⁵⁶ Scott, James, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, 120.

Manickam, Sandra Khor, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, 111.

¹⁵⁷ Manickam, Sandra Khor, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, 118-119.

¹⁵⁸ Manickam, Sandra Khor, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, 92.

¹⁵⁹ Manickam, Sandra Khor, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, 97.

“(a) any person whose male parent is or was, a member of an aboriginal ethnic group, who speaks an aboriginal language and habitually follows an aboriginal way of life, aboriginal customs and beliefs, and includes a descendant through males of such persons;

(b) any person of any race adopted when an infant by aborigines who has been brought up as an aborigine, habitually speaks an aboriginal language, habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs and is a member of an aboriginal community;

(c) the child of any union between an aboriginal female and a male of another race, provided that child habitually speaks an aboriginal language, habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs and remains a member of an aboriginal community.”¹⁶⁰

While this does not exempt Muslim Orang Asli from being defined as Orang Asli, there are attempts at converting the Orang Asli to Islam.¹⁶¹ This goes hand in hand with the professed goal of the government, articulated in 1961, to integrate the Orang Asli into larger Malay society.¹⁶²

Regroupment schemes, a form of the Emergency era resettlement schemes, today are used to steal land from Orang Asli.¹⁶³ Regroupment schemes are done with the express purpose of helping ‘develop’ Orang Asli with such lofty goals as eradicating poverty, allowing access to essential services, and protect them from subversive elements.¹⁶⁴ However, in reality, these regroupment schemes are a land grab. In one case, a community with 7,000 hectares was regrouped into a settlement with a mere 95.1 hectares.¹⁶⁵ For some resettled groups, the new settlements lack sufficient resources to sustain themselves, and the Orang Asli are forced to

¹⁶⁰ Manickam, Sandra Khor, *Taming the Wild: Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya*, 99.

¹⁶¹ Colin, *The Orang Asli and the UNDRIP: From Rhetoric to Recognition*, 62.

¹⁶² Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 94.

¹⁶³ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 113,

¹⁶⁴ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 113.

¹⁶⁵ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 114.

move.¹⁶⁶ This land is taken either for logging operations or to fuel the plantation economy.¹⁶⁷

Between 1979 and 2010, twenty-five regroupment schemes were approved, with most of them also being implemented.¹⁶⁸

The position Orang Asli people find themselves in today is similar to the position many other Indigenous peoples find themselves in today, with a state that seeks their assimilation as a means to lay claim to their land. Malaysia mimics other mestizo societies like those found in Latin America, where the dominant ethnic group is of Indigenous descent, but the state still attempts to take land from the Indigenous people. Orang Asli are subject to the logic of elimination, and their rights, as guaranteed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are often ignored.¹⁶⁹

However, it was not always this way, and the legal term ‘Indigenous’ exists more to explain current circumstances than to evaluate similar systems of oppression and state making undertaken by nation states than to adequately explain how complex cultural and technological circumstances created a history that finds mirrors across many countries, especially those in the Americas, Oceania, Asia, and Africa. A more thorough examination of the meaning of Orang Asli servitude will helpfully complicate but also illuminate historical comparisons.

¹⁶⁶ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 116.

¹⁶⁷ Nicholas, Colin, *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*, 118 and 120.

¹⁶⁸ Nicholas, Colin, Jenita Engi., and Yen Ping Teh. 2010. *The Orang Asli and the UNDRIP: From Rhetoric to Recognition*, 60.

¹⁶⁹ Nicholas, Colin, Jenita Engi., and Yen Ping Teh. 2010. *The Orang Asli and the UNDRIP: From Rhetoric to Recognition*, 60.

The ‘Sakai’ Argument

The catch-all terms used in Malay for Orang Asli peoples, Sakai, Jakun, and even Semang, are today sometimes considered derogatory, or even slurs.¹⁷⁰ Jakun can mean naïve; Sakai can mean savage or even slave, and Semang, while the least offensive and actually derived from an Orang Asli word for human, is sometimes used offensively due to its linguistic similarity to the Malay term *pangan*, or forest.¹⁷¹ However, the term ‘slave’ is a catch-all term applied to many different and disparate forms of bondage and labor, to the point where translating Sakai as ‘slave’ demands unpacking. What did ‘slave’ mean in Malay culture, and what did that mean for Orang Asli people?

What is ‘Slavery’?

We need to show caution when deciding how to translate Malay concepts of slavery into English. There is a double standard in Western scholarship today where some practices are termed ‘indentured servitude’ while others are termed ‘slavery.’ In a western context, this is because the differences that chattel slavery had from other forms of forced labor and bondage necessitated a distinction. Among the Nahua, a person primarily became enslaved either through selling themselves into slavery or as a punishment for a crime, but the treatment was usually (except in the case of sacrifices) much better than that of slaves in Europe at the same time.¹⁷² In

¹⁷⁰ Gianni, Rosemary. 2023. “Temoq, Semelai, Semaq Beri and Jakun: Using Orang Asli Ethnonyms to Reconstruct Orang Asli Ethnohistory.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore)* 54 (2). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 271–97. doi:10.1017/S0022463423000309, 278.

¹⁷¹ Subramaniam, Yogeswaran, and Kirk Endicott. “Orang Asli Land and Resource Rights in the Malay States, 1874–1939.” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 93, no. 2 (2020): 87–114. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ras.2020.0033>, 91.

¹⁷² Vyšný, Peter. “Pre-Hispanic Nahua Slavery.” *Ethnologia Actualis* 20, no. 2 (2020): 85–112. doi:10.2478/eas-2021-0012, 85.

European contexts, like for Irish forced labor in the British colonies, the term used is ‘indentured servant.’¹⁷³ This creates a skewed picture of how common ‘slavery’ was in non-European contexts and how sparse it was, aside from the chattel slavery of Africans and their descendants, in European contexts.

In Perak, a state in what is now Malaysia and once an independent sultanate, W. E. Maxwell identified two ‘types’ of ‘slavery’ in 1890. *Hamba* or *abdi* were ‘slaves’ and *kawan* or *orang berhutang* were ‘debtors.’ A person became a slave by being taken as a captive in a war, being an “infidel captured by force (e.g., a Batak of Sumatra or Sakei [*sic*] of the Peninsula)”, a murderer or criminal who cannot pay the fine is enslaved to the Raja, or the child of a female slave who is not the son of the owner. The neat categories of *kawan* and *hamba* are complicated by the way that *orang berhutang* were often called *hamba*.¹⁷⁴ Further complicating our idea of slavery on Peninsular Malaysia is the roots and use of words relating to slavery.

Hamba can be used when speaking in Malay when speaking to someone of higher authority, particularly a Raja, to show deference.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, even *sahaya*, the precursor to the common formal pronoun today *saya*, comes from a Sanskrit word meaning follower or slave.¹⁷⁶ The difference between what a ‘follower’ and a ‘slave’ is will be relevant to our exploration of the complications with accusations of slavery. *Hamba* also appears here as a first-

¹⁷³ Handler, Jerome S, and Matthew C Reilly. “Contesting ‘White Slavery’ in the Caribbean: Enslaved Africans and European Indentured Servants in Seventeenth-Century Barbados.” *New West Indian Guide* 91, no. 1/2 (2017): 30–55. doi:10.1163/22134360-09101056, 30.

¹⁷⁴ MAXWELL, W. E. “THE LAW RELATING TO SLAVERY AMONG THE MALAYS.” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 22 (1890): 247–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41560788>, 248.

¹⁷⁵ Ajamiseba, Daniel C. *A Classical Malay Text Grammar: Insights into a Non-Western Text Tradition* / by Danielo C. Ajamiseba. Australia: Dept. of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1983, 40.

¹⁷⁶ Richard James Wilkinson and Richard Olaf Winstedt, “Malay Grammar: Winstedt, Richard Olof, Sir, 1878-1966: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming,” Internet Archive, July 24, 2008, <https://archive.org/details/malaygrammar00winsrich/page/108/mode/2up>, 108.

person pronoun used to show deference, but more than just for Rajas and their subjects. The word is defined here as thus, “{slave) a self-depreciatory form for the first person, which may be used by any class; for instance, by small rajas to big or aged chiefs, to the wealthy and to Europeans as well as by inferiors to superiors. It can be either singular or plural. The forms hamba datok and hamba tuan are common. It occurs also as perhamba and di-perhamba.”¹⁷⁷ We are now left with 3 different English terms for four different Malay terms relating to slavery; *hamba*, *kawan*, *abdi*, and *orang berhutang* in Malay and follower, slave, and indentured servant in English.

Coming back to the word ‘follower’, we move slightly over to the city of Singapore under the Sultan of Johore who in turn delegated the ruling to the *Temenggong* (similar to a governor). Singapore’s development under the British Empire and specifically the East India Company sought the immigration (or settling) of large amounts of people from Peninsular Malaysia, particularly those of Chinese descent but also significant amounts of Malays and a fewer number of Indians.¹⁷⁸ The first British Resident of Singapore (governor), William Farquhar, distinguished between the Malays living on the peninsula and under the *Temenggong* and Sultan and the Malays being brought in. The Malays already living on the island were called ‘followers’ by Farquhar because they lived under the *kerajaan* system, where they were ‘subjects’ or ‘followers’ of the Sultan and Temenggong.¹⁷⁹

John Crawford, a later Resident of Singapore, continued this distinction, but he also changed how the ‘followers’ were classified. Although he admitted that the system was not what

¹⁷⁷ Richard James Wilkinson and Richard Olaf Winstedt, “Malay Grammar: Winstedt, Richard Olof, Sir, 1878-1966: Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming,” 108-109.

¹⁷⁸ Knapman, Gareth. “Settler Colonialism and Usurping Malay Sovereignty in Singapore.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore)* 52, no. 3 (2021): 418–40. doi:10.1017/S0022463421000606, 432.

¹⁷⁹ Knapman, Gareth. “Settler Colonialism and Usurping Malay Sovereignty in Singapore,” 425.

the British traditionally thought of as slavery, the ability to translate words like *hamba* as slave proved a deadly weapon, as he later said “The chiefs insist that every person belonging to them is a slave.”¹⁸⁰ This was more than a harmless rhetorical embellishment, as Crawford later wrote the EIC office in Calcutta justifying buying and taking the island because the people there were slaves, and that it was an embarrassment to the British Empire to have a colony with slaves.¹⁸¹

While we may be tempted to sympathize with the British abolitionist goal, even if systems could be misinterpreted or even manipulated as slavery, it is important to point out that British practices, while in theory abolitionist, was very comfortable with slavery once they had established control of a colony. In colonial Ghana, slavery was still practiced even decades after it was illegal, and people who attempted to challenge this system under the grounds that it was illegal under British law found that the British would not protect them.¹⁸² Slavery, or systems like it, was primarily a problem not when it was brutal, not when it was inhumane, but when it was useful to get rid of it.

How prevalent was slavery to the Malay states? Patrick Morrah writes in “The History of the Malay Police” that in the time before colonization, “slavery was an integral part [of society], and in which petty chieftains all powerful in the regions, regarded the peasant as little more than a source of labour and income, the ordinary individual had no rights at all.”¹⁸³ In Duarte Barbosa’s account from 1518, the Malays “possessed many slaves with wives and children.”¹⁸⁴ Slavery was indeed common before colonization, but the slaves that existed were split between

¹⁸⁰Knapman, Gareth. “Settler Colonialism and Usurping Malay Sovereignty in Singapore,” 426.

¹⁸¹Knapman, Gareth. “Settler Colonialism and Usurping Malay Sovereignty in Singapore,” 436-7

¹⁸² Chaney, Michael A. *Biography* 35, no. 2 (2012): 375–77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23541250>, 375.

¹⁸³ Morrah, Patrick. “The History of the Malayan Police.” *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 36, no. 2 (202) (1963): 1–172. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41505527>.

¹⁸⁴ Alatas, Hussein. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism*. London: F. Cass, 1977, 35.

systems like the *kerajaan*, indentured servitude, the labor of criminals, and slaves abducted from the interior (i.e. Sakai).

Isabella Bird wrote a travel journal from her travels to Peninsular Malaysia in 1879, and what stood out to her is maybe enlightening to the possible frequency of each type of bondage.¹⁸⁵ Bird details,

“Slavery and debt bondage exist in all the native States; except in Selangor and Sungei Ujong, where it has recently been abolished, as it is hoped it will be in Perak. The slaves of the reigning princes were very easily acquired, for a prince had only to send a messenger bearing a sword or kris to a house, and the parents were obliged to give up any one of their children without delay or question. In debt slavery, which prevails more or less among all classes, and has done a great deal to degrade the women of the Peninsula, a man owing a trifling debt incurred through extravagance, misfortune or gambling, can be seized by his creditor; when he, his wife, and children, including those who may afterwards be born, and probably their descendants, become slaves.”¹⁸⁶

Bird writes extensively on debt bondage and slavery, but she does mention enslavement of Orang Asli peoples, “By the Malays they are called indiscriminately Kafirs or infidels, and are interesting to them only in so far as they can use them for bearing burdens, clearing jungle, procuring gutta, and in child-stealing, an abominable Malay custom, which, it is hoped, has received its death-blow in Perak at least.” Also writing, “Another common practice in the States, more especially in Perak, is to capture, as you might wild beasts, the unoffending Jakun women, and make them and their children slaves through generations.”¹⁸⁷

We can see that the enslavement of non-Muslim tribes of the interior, here called Jakun, was definitely practiced. However, Frank A. Swettenham, The Honorable the Secretary for Native States, Singapore, writes Hugh Low, Resident, The Hon. the Colonial Secretary, Straits

¹⁸⁵ Bird, Isabella L. (Isabella Lucy). *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*. Project Gutenberg, n.d.

¹⁸⁶ Bird, Isabella L. (Isabella Lucy). *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*. Project Gutenberg, n.d.

¹⁸⁷ Bird, Isabella L. (Isabella Lucy). *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*. Project Gutenberg, n.d.

Settlements in the appendix of the Guttenberg version on the goal of eliminating slavery in Peninsular Malaysia. Almost the entire correspondence is focused on the elimination of debt-slavery, with only Swettenham briefly mentioning the enslavement of Jakun people. Why would these men be more interested in the elimination of debt bondage if a more intensive form of slavery was happening concurrently? The possible answers are that the British were prejudiced against the Jakun enough to not see their enslavement as a problem, that debt slavery proved more of an obstacle to British goals in the region than the enslavement of Jakun, or that the enslavement of Jakun was significantly more rare or less visible than debt slavery. In Malay culture, perceptions by Europeans were that slavery was not considered as detestable as an institution as the British considered it, Alfred Wallace (of Wallace Line fame) writes, “Theft and kidnapping are thought lightly of, while insults, real or imaginary, are savagely avenged on the spot.”¹⁸⁸

It is not only possible, but likely that Orang Asli perceptions of their enslavement were very different. Orang Asli migration or retreat deeper into the forest or mountains is proof that at least some Orang Asli did not see their position as benign subjecthood. On the slave raids, “Usually well-armed parties would attack at night, killing the adult men and women and capturing the children. Sometimes Malays tempted or coerced Orang Asli into kidnapping other Orang Asli for them in order to ‘preserve their own womenfolk from captivity.’”¹⁸⁹ In the *Hikayat Abdullah*, Abdullah Bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi compares the Jakun to animals.¹⁹⁰ It is of

¹⁸⁸ Guillemard, F. H. H. (Francis Henry Hill), and Alfred Russel Wallace. *Malaysia and the Pacific Archipelagoes*. E. Stanford, n.d. doi: 10.5962/bhl.title.25346, 24.

¹⁸⁹ Endicott, Kirk M., ed. 2016. *Malaysia's Original People: Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*. Singapore: NUS Press, 18.

¹⁹⁰ Nicholas, Colin, International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs., and Center for Orang Asli Concerns. 2000. *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources: Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*. Copenhagen, Denmark: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 70.

note that this was written in 1837, well after the penetration of European racial hierarchal attitudes into Malaya. Abdullah's attitudes may not have been unusual for the time, but our knowledge of how Malays thought of Orang Asli groups before colonization, during the Portuguese reign of Malacca, and during the Dutch reign are much less well-known.

The term 'Sakai' today, according to an interview with Dr. Kamal Solhaimi Fadzil, Head of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Malaya, could be considered hate speech. However, the use could also stem from ignorance, and as with many contentious terms, there have been efforts to reclaim it. Part of this stems from anxieties over the loss of legal rights with the rejection of the term.¹⁹¹ However, Persatuan Mahasiswa Orang Asli Malaysia (@MahasiswaOA) on x.com has been using the hashtag #ProudSakai in an attempt to reclaim the term. This does not, of course, mean it is a totally defanged term. In 2025, a netizen called Ramli Nor, the first Orang Asli Member of Parliament, a 'Sakai.' This was used in a way to insult his intelligence, using racialized language to insult an Orang Asli man for being more 'savage' or 'unintelligent' than, presumably, a non-Orang Asli Malaysian.¹⁹² The term is also, notably, more popularly used in Thailand to refer to the Maniq minority.¹⁹³

What can be gleaned from the use of the term 'Sakai' in Malayan history? We can definitively say that today it is often used as a negative term in Malaysia, and we can also say that the association with Orang Asli peoples as more 'savage' or even 'animalistic' was present from at least 1837. However, we cannot say that 'Sakai' always had the same negative

¹⁹¹Astro AWANI, "Consider This: 'Sakai' | Unpacking a Contested Term," YouTube, July 21, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Clv3DdWEPGw>.

¹⁹²FMT Reporters, "Report Filed over Derogatory Term Used on Orang Asli MP Ramli," Free Malaysia Today | FMT, June 24, 2025, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/06/24/report-filed-over-derogatory-term-used-on-orang-asli-mp-ramli>.

¹⁹³King-Oau Laohong, "Sea Gypsies Want a Chance to Settle Down," <https://www.bangkokpost.com>, December 23, 2017, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1384430/sea-gypsies-want-a-chance-to-settle-down>.

connotation; the term clearly shifted in its meaning as ‘subjects’ and even ‘slaves’ became a more devalued, and eventually obsolete, part of Malayan and eventually Malaysian society. While it is important to note what ‘Sakai’ means, we cannot be too hasty in extrapolating an entire worldview from it, and when we do make assumptions about the societies that created and used the term, we cannot use the modern connotations as evidence of past attitudes. While slavery of Orang Asli people did exist during precolonial and colonial eras, the meaning of slavery seems to have changed significantly. With this summary of the history of Orang Asli and the use of the term ‘Sakai’, we can move onto the gaps in this research as well as possible avenues for filling them.

Limits and Possible Expansions

My main limitations in my research are around sources. I was not able to go to Malaysia to read archives there, and the archives online were missing a few key sources that I found myself wishing I could read. “Orang Asli in the News: the Emergency Years: 1950–1958,” “Malaysia: Land, autonomy and empowerment for the Orang Asal,” and “The Malays and, the ‘Sakai’: Some Comments on Their Social Relations in Peninsular Malaysia” were all secondary sources I was unable to acquire but think would have been productive for my research. I was able to find *Bujang Valley and Early Civilisations in Southeast Asia*, but my copy had a note inside the cover saying that there were figures and pages missing.¹⁹⁴ It directed me to email one of the

¹⁹⁴ Malaysia. Jabatan Warisan Negara, publisher, Stephen Ming Soon Chia, and Barbara Watson Andaya. “Bujang Valley and Early Civilisations in Southeast Asia /.” Edited by Stephen Ming Soon Chia and Barbara Watson Andaya. Department of National Heritage, Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture, 2011.

authors to get the corrected version, but when I emailed him, he told me he had retired. I was told to wait for the next edition which hopefully would fix those errors.

A complete ethnohistory of Orang Asli groups would be vitally important for understanding Orang Asli history from their own perspectives, but I was unable to travel to Malaysia, let alone travel to each of the eighteen tribes and interview them. This is the most obvious and important next step in evaluating and understanding Orang Asli history. Although I was able to use some sources written by Orang Asli scholars, this obviously self-selects for those most willing to enter a research space. Research spaces, according to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* are colonial and colonizing spaces.¹⁹⁵ Although we are not limited to one side or even the 'winner's' side, most of my sources were in English, and those that were not in Malay. I did not use any sources in Chinese, Tamil, or Orang Asli languages.

I did use Malay sources for this paper. However, I was not able to use many Malay historical sources like the Hikayats or even much of *Sejarah Melayu*. Part of this is because of the destruction of Malay sources, the limited amount of them, and my limited Malay. I studied the Indonesian language for 2 years, and Indonesian is mostly intelligible with Malay. However, literary language is very difficult for me to read at this point, so I was very slow and fairly inept at reading the *Hikayat Abdullah* and *Sejarah Melayu*, whose old and literary language was difficult and slow for me to parse. I did use them, but my effectiveness was such that I do not believe I got any significant information from my reading that other scholars missed. Andaya's analysis of the lack of mentions, save one, is sufficient for my purposes and lack of literary

¹⁹⁵ Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (Third edition. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), 1, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350225282>.

expertise.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, I am less familiar with the cultural contexts of literature in early Malay history on Malaya. This is a much easier task to rectify than the study of multiple Orang Asli groups, however, so I expect that to be rectified by future scholarship more immediately.

I did use Malay sources, but most of my Malay sources were primary sources on people's opinions like Pak Helmi's *The Patriot*. A more complete history of Orang Asli is needed after Leonard Andaya's "ORANG ASLI AND THE MELAYU IN THE HISTORY OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA," which was the most complete history I was able to find.

Against Comparison

The purpose of writing a dedicated history of Orang Asli people was to show how the historical conditions in Malaya and later Malaysia have led the Orang Asli and Malays to find themselves in their respective positions. It is not, however, to dismiss the real financial and material disadvantages Malays and Orang Asli have found themselves during the era of nation states and neoliberalism. Orang Asli's circumstances in regard to environmental, ecological, and economic marginalization and colonization are well-written on in books like *Living on the Periphery : Development and the Islamization of the Orang Asli, Malaysia's Original People : Past, Present and Future of the Orang Asli*, and *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources : Indigenous Politics, Development, and Identity in Peninsular Malaysia*. However, historical comparisons have found themselves trapped in the shadows of the most famous settler colonial states like the United States, New Zealand, and Israel.

¹⁹⁶ ANDAYA, LEONARD Y. "ORANG ASLI AND THE MELAYU IN THE HISTORY OF THE MALAY PENINSULA." (*Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 75, no. 1 (282) (2002)), 35, <http://www.jstor.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/stable/41493461>

The three reasons for using the comparative method in academia in accordance with Nick Collier's reading of Theda Skocpol and Margaret Sommers are "the systematic examination of covariation among the cases for the purposes of *casual analysis*...the examination of a number of cases with the goal of showing that a particular model or set of concepts usefully illuminates these cases...[and] the examination of two or more cases to highlight how different they are."¹⁹⁷ Helmi can give us an example of contrast to show how different the cases of Orang Asli and Native Americans are, while casual analysis best fits the work of Mahathir and Kampong Malay.

However, the political usage of the comparisons between Malaysia and settler colonial states like New Zealand, Israel, and the United States merit a distinction from the umbrella term 'casual analysis.' Alatas provides a thorough critique of Mahathir's infamous *The Malay Dilemma* and its ahistorical analysis of Malaysian history and even contemporary conditions.¹⁹⁸ These types of comparison are useful to talk about separately because they differ so much from other forms of casual comparison in their intent. Whether the motivation of this type of comparison is malicious or benign is unhelpful to understand them as a political tool used by demagogues, concerned citizens, and even human rights activists, but I argue that it does merit a different understanding and categorization.

The history of Orang Asli, Malay people, and settlement on Peninsular Malaysia does not match up cleanly to any of the settler states it is frequently compared to, but this does not necessarily mean all comparisons to settler states are necessarily bad or misleading. It does, however, call for caution in our comparisons. It is easier and perhaps more effective for political goals to compare the history of Peninsular Malaysia to the United States or Israel even when

¹⁹⁷ Collier, David, *The Comparative Method*, (University of California, 1993), 108.

¹⁹⁸ Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, 166.

better comparisons might lie in places like Fiji or with the mestizo classes of Hispanic America. Comparison must be utilized carefully and precisely and using the current nation state situations that numerous peoples around the globe have found themselves in to extrapolate a monolithic history of settler colonization is unhelpful and misleading.

Settler colonial comparison in Malaysia is not utilized primarily to illuminate ongoing processes or to build solidarity with other colonized people, but primarily to shock and sensationalize audiences or dismiss concerns from marginalized peoples. When Shu-Mei Shih argues that Chinese settlement in Malaysia amounted to settler colonialism, she writes that Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan's histories of settlement, "roughly parallel those of the British in North America, Australia, and New Zealand."¹⁹⁹ Even in academia, comparisons are not utilized like the theoretical ideals expressed by Theda Skocpol and Margaret Sommers but instead for shock value, political purposes, and economic gain.

Comparisons to settler colonized people as a pan-Indigenous method of forming solidarity and possible avenues to improve current conditions is not the problem, but extrapolating an entire history of settler colonization onto these peoples is reaching at best and deliberate misreading for the purpose of demagoguery at worst. Although its effects on the image of settler colonized peoples have not yet been ascertained, the effects of the comparison on the Indigenous people of Malaysia have led to a discourse of toxicity regarding historical revisionism and identity politics. Future historical comparisons should be utilized to make useful

¹⁹⁹ Shih, Shu-Mei. "The Concept of the Sinophone." *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 709–18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41414144>.

comparisons for the purpose of illuminating structures rather than to allow maximum legibility at the cost of obscuring actual events and relationships.

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