A sense of space: land struggles of the Semai of peninsular Malaysia
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Chapter One: Introduction
The Basic Issue, Central Questions and Main Objectives of this Research

In April of 1995, a representative from an Orang Asli (original or aboriginal people) village invited the State Assemblyman of their constituency to visit their village and campaign for voter support in the up-coming general elections in Malaysia. At the same time, the village representative also invited some journalists of a Malaysian daily newspaper to report on their meeting with the State Assemblyman. The journalists were invited to report another happening which the Orang Asli villagers had planned for this occasion. In the previous eleven months this Orang Asli group had laboured to prepare a memorandum regarding their masalah tanah (Malay for "land problem") they were experiencing. The memorandum, which outlined the history of this Orang Asli group's relations to their traditional land, was also a request to the state and federal governments to gazette the specified territory as an Orang Asli Reserve Land. The villagers had specifically planned to present this memorandum to the government on the eve of the general elections in the hope that it would help them put forward their land issues effectively. To this end they organized this meeting with the incumbent state representative who himself was running as a candidate for re-elections. In the newspaper, the journalists explained the event:

It was an opportunity for the village to impress upon the candidate the urgency and magnitude of their plight. "The land title, which will be held collectively and which cannot be sold by any one of us, will assure our livelihood and the continuance of our culture," said Tijah as spokesperson of the village. "We have a subsistence economy. We trap and hunt for small animals, fish, and tend to our kebun getah (rubber smallholding). To get more income, we collect petai, durian, rattan, bamboo and firewood to sell in town," she said in explaining how her people's livelihood is dependent on the forest eco-system. The land referred to in the memorandum is their tanah pusaka (traditional land). "Every child in this village, when they come of age, is taken by the village elders through the jungle and shown the boundaries of our village with adjacent orang asli villages. We regard the land as ours. Our ancestors named the rivers and the hills. When the orang putih (white people) came to map the area, our forefathers told them the asli (original) names for the places which survive until today," Tijah said emphatically. The villagers are realistic enough to recognise that their hold over their traditional lands is tenous. They have been helpless against encroachment of their land by loggers, TOL (temporary occupation licence) farmers, and large development projects like FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) and FELCRA (Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority) schemes. "We are not against development. We want development but all the projects that have gone up around our kampung (village) have not involved us. Even if we find work in the oil palm plantations or factories, it is only as coolies. Who has the development been for?" Tijah asked rhetorically. The village only has TOL status on the land that their houses and
rubber smallholdings occupy. They have been waiting since 1969 for their land to be gazetted as Orang Asli Reserve Land, which they will hold as trust as a community. This recognition of their land rights is the singular request they are making to the candidate. It gave them a glimmer of hope when Veerasingam [the state assembly member] put his name in support of the memorandum. He said: "I cannot promise to give 20 acres of land to the people, but I will promise to berjuang (campaign) for them." (Sunday Star, April 23 1995, p. 15)

Since the 1970s, many different groups of indigenous peoples across Asia have become caught up in what is usually termed the "land rights" struggle (Bose, 1995). The above-mentioned example of an Orang Asli village in Malaysia is but one case in point. Land rights have become a unifying theme for indigenous groups across Asia and their movements have rapidly gathered momentum in the 1980s - indicative by, inter alia, their linking up with similar movements earlier established in other continents such as Australia, and more recently with "first nations" networks in Europe and North America. The primary objective of these varied land rights movements is the actual legal ownership and title of all lands and reserves on which these indigenous groups live coupled with the acquisition of lands still held by the state. More specifically these indigenous movements seek for a reinstatement of their traditional political, economic and cultural rights over their ancestral/hereditary land and resources therein (AIPP, 1993). According to their leaders their land rights struggle is not merely a striving for legal ownership over a specific piece of land nor is it seeking for rights of access alone. These groups seek for their rights in land to be recognised and enforced by the legitimized authorities as claims based on the former's special identity as indigenous peoples, or "first peoples" of the land (Ibid.).

One such land rights movement is that of the Orang Asli in West Malaysia. "Orang Asli" literally means "original" or "aboriginal people" and is the formal referent for these groups of indigenous peoples ethnologists have commonly categorized as belonging to 3 distinct ethnic groups and consisting 19 different sub-ethnic or sub-tribal groups (Map...). Together they number about 85 000 or 0.7% of the national population of Malaysia. The Orang Asli movement first emerged in organizational form in the early 1980s. A Orang Asli youth conference was organized in 1980 followed up by a headmen's conference a year and a half later. In the latter, a joint memorandum was issued to the government outlining the grievances
and concerns of the Orang Asli population (Appendix I). In 1984 a national Orang Asli organization was set up and since then its leaders have maintained negotiations with the state and federal governments on behalf of the Orang Asli population. Meanwhile Orang Asli groups at the village and regional level have also staged campaigns of sorts to highlight their predicament. Apart from a few incidents of militant action, on the whole the local Orang Asli groups resort to a non-violent means of petition-campaigns, lobbying, negotiation, litigation, direct-actions of sorts and "passive" resistance to achieve their goals.

In recent years there have been significant efforts by leaders of the Orang Asli movement in establishing alliances with inter-state indigenous networks, examples of which are the Southeast Asian Alliance of Indigenous Peoples, the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact and the Peoples' Plan for the 21st Century, etc. The global dimension to their struggles is also evident in their communication, financial and solidarity links with trans-national human-rights, tribal, developmental, environmental movements and other NGOs and inter-state agencies. At the local level Orang Asli groups have also forged organizational links with cultural workers and social activists of different NGOs, religion-based movements, and, more recently, social researchers. For instance, the Orang Asli Studies Group at the National University of Malaysia is actively working with POASM leaders in joint campaigns directed at the state authorities. There is also an Orang Asli senator, in the upper house of Parliament, who has recently involved himself with POASM activities as well. Thus, while the Orang Asli movement seems to have emerged from inter-village initiatives they demonstrate at the same time regional, national and global links.

In expressing their *masalah tanah*, as their predicament is commonly referred to, the social idioms employed by the Orang Asli hark back to a history of struggles, a "first peoples" consciousness and a characteristically ecological culture underpinning their life-style, community organization and economy. This is explicitly demonstrated in the example of the Orang Asli group mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. In expressing their claims a distinct *asli* (original) history, a set of traditions, and ancestral heritage are called upon to establish their distinct identity as Orang Asli. And it is this special identity which underscores their relationship with the land and the basis of the rights in land they are striving for. Therefore, although the land rights or *masalah tanah* is the primary issue around which the contemporary
struggles of the Orang Asli is organized the question of a social identity is also an integral part of these politics.

While the land rights struggle has been an on going and an apparently everyday-issue for the Orang Asli for many years now, there is a notable lack of attention to this *masalah tanah* in Orang Asli studies. Most Orang Asli studies do acknowledge that the land problem is a major issue for these people. Most of these studies are also concerned with the changing social relations of the Orang Asli. What is lacking in these studies, however, is an indepth analysis on the changing social relations of the Orang Asli and the linkages with the broader social processes such as that of their land rights struggle. Anthropological scholarship, by far the major contributor of knowledge on Orang Asli social relations, while concerned with the articulation and the transformation of identities in the field, fail to contextualize the processes or relate them to the land problem (Dentan, 1978; Carey, 1976; Hood, 1975; Robarchek, Clayton, 1977; Robarchek, Carole, 1980; Jimin, 1983; Baharon, 1972, 1982; Liow, 1982; Roseman, 1982; Benjamin, 1980, 1985; Ave' 1985). Other studies which do contextualize the social transformations in wider historical and social processes limit themselves to interpretations of Orang Asli social change in terms of Malay history and the political economy of the state (Tan, 1976; Means, 1977, 1984, 1985; Rambo, 1982; Hood, 1990; Jackson & Rudner, 1979; Endicott, 1979, 1983; McLellan, 1983; Walker, 1983; Nicholas et. al., 1989; Gomes, 1986; Rachagan, 1990; Thalalla, 1984; Nicholas, 1985). Moreover, what cursory references made to the "response...[and] protest" of the Orang Asli (Nicholas, 1990:81), or their "political awakening" (Means, 1985:649) are framed within the context of the state-dominated political economy. The indigenous "resistance of direct actions" is thus interpreted as the cost of "social modernisation", a reaction to the political economy of development, and its attendant theme - the expansion and consolidation of state power - all of which have resulted in their low social status, appalling poverty and powerlessness (Ibid.).

While these commentaries are enlightening to certain socio-economic changes of the Orang Asli situation they do not address adequately the significant social-cultural relations that transcend the state, cut across the economy and differentiate the indigenous themselves, as indicated in their current land rights movement. More importantly, an analysis of social changes need to consider both the forces of change "from above", as it were, as well as the sources and
direction of change posed by "counter-movements". Otherwise, to borrow a criticism from another field, it may be said of these studies that they represent the Orang Asli merely as "victims" in a "social-darwinist climate" but nothing of their own agency in the process of social change (Breman, 1985:34-5).

The central issue in my research is the contemporary land rights struggles of indigenous peoples, the Orang Asli in particular. I wish to argue that these struggles are initiatives originating from and generated by circumstances within as well as beyond specific and concrete indigenous localities. The complex interplay of cultural-political dynamics surrounding the land rights struggle are significantly constituting and changing indigenous relations and social identity. Local Orang Asli groups are reclaiming their history and tradition as current political strategies in their everyday struggle over the rights to land, resources and meanings. Their land rights movement has also generated a call for special citizenship privileges within the nation-state (Memorandum, 1982). In other words, the indigenous land rights movement is about a cultural-political struggle that is shaping and is being shaped by indigenous social relations.

In order to pursue this issue of the indigenous' land rights a number of specific questions need to be addressed:

1. What rights in land have the Orang Asli historically enjoyed? How and why did these change over time and what implications did these changes have for the Orang Asli?

2. How should we describe contemporary Orang Asli relations and what role does land rights struggle play in constituting and transforming those relations?

3. How are the contemporary transformations of Orang Asli social identity and relations linked to such agencies as the state, the Orang Asli movement, other indigenous movements in the region, trans-national organizational networks and non-governmental organizations involved in indigenous peoples' land rights issues etc.?

4. What does the contemporary land rights struggle mean for the more extensive cultural-political struggles of the Orang Asli?

These questions are addressed in the context of the Orang Asli of West Malaysia. They are questions that have not been asked before nor adequately answered with regard to the Orang Asli. The primary objective of this research, therefore, is to write up an adequate story of the Orang Asli land rights struggle. But how we tell the story of the Orang Asli land rights struggle
is an integral component of the story itself. In other words, how we conceptualize and represent the changing social relations of the Orang Asli vis-a-vis the land rights struggle need to be scrutinized as much as the "raw data" of their situation. Moreover, the Orang Asli are not the only indigenous people involved in these types of struggle concerning land. Thus, while this research concentrates on the experiences of the Orang Asli there is a wider ambition. The more far-reaching aim of this study is to contribute to developing a methodology to study the processes of contemporary political struggles of indigenous peoples.

Methods and Data Base of the Research

The questions raised in the foregoing section require a study of the specific history, sociology and cultural experiences of the Orang Asli in the context of changing social relations, external as well as internal. This implies two things. First, in order to answer the questions an interdisciplinary approach in research methodology is necessary. Second, the research has to be grounded in a concrete and specific empirical base. In other words, what is required is an adequate database of information pertaining to a specific locality with which to address the questions posed in this research.

The first task before fieldwork, was to collect information regarding the research questions from extant documentation regarding specific Orang Asli units. This was a difficult task. In terms of official historical information, there is almost no available data on land occupation and land-use regarding specific Orang Asli population-units until the 1960s. As the Malaysian state began to re-settle and re-organize Orang Asli groups into village-administrative units in the 1960s, some such data were then collected for the first time. The currently available data collected since the 1960s provide information about the land claims, land occupation and land-use of specific Orang Asli villages but only in terms of the state's intended plans and programmes for those Orang Asli villages rather than data on the actual practices.

Most ethnographies produced on the Orang Asli since early this century do acknowledge, no matter how briefly, the land problems of these people. With rare exceptions, however, their concern is not with Orang Asli land rights much less the question of land rights and the wider social relations of a specific group of Orang Asli. They are preoccupied variously
with kinship and ritual practices structures of social organization, land tenure and economic systems of different Orang Asli groups. There is much information on the changing relations between the state and the Orang Asli and the changing economies of Orang Asli units as a result of expansionist capitalist and market forces. Thus, in terms of research methods, there was a need for much gleaning, probing and sifting through the much official, historical and ethnographic documentation currently available on the Orang Asli. Through this process, some information was gathered which proved useful in addressing some of the questions posed in this research. Basically, the information gathered were on the changing norms and structures governing Orang Asli relations to land rather than the actual dynamics of the changes.

A similar process of sifting through a vast body of documentation was also necessary to gather preliminary information regarding the question of the linkages between the Orang Asli movement and trans-national, inter-state or extra-village agencies. This body of literature were mainly human-rights documentation, reports and minutes of meetings of indigenous networks and not least of which were e-mail records of communication between Orang Asli networks and other agencies abroad. Again, the information gathered in this area were of limited usefulness for this research in that they focused more on the highlights and outcomes of communication, financial, ideological and solidarity linkages rather than on the actual dynamics of the relations between different specific agencies.

Given that most of the information I require could not be found in the extant ethnographies and village accounts on the Orang Asli, I had to bring my research questions to the field in order to produce an adequate database for analysis. There were problems in the field as well. The matter of conducting fieldwork in Malaysia especially concerning political movements is a sensitive issue and therefore has to be treated with care. In the case of fieldwork among the Orang Asli there are even more obstacles. The Orang Asli population inhabit settlement areas which were restricted zones until 1990 to all but specified state agencies such as the JHEOA (the Department of Orang Asli Affairs), the State Islamic Religious Department and the security forces. Although the police curfew is now lifted, specific legislation and other measures restricting the interactions between Orang Asli and "outsiders" are still in force. State surveillance and control over Orang Asli areas were stepped up in recent years given the increased activities of Orang Asli groups following the "International Year of Indigenous
Peoples" and the general elections which were scheduled for 1994 (the elections were subsequently postponed to 1995). In 1993, for instance, Orang Asli representatives and indigenous leaders from the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak entered, for the first time, into a joint campaign to make their claims to the Malaysian government. This and other activities linking the Orang Asli with trans-national activist networks brought severe criticism from the Malaysian government. The latter accused western nationals and organizations of being "neo-imperialistic" and "eco-imperialistic" agitators influencing the Malaysian indigenous' land struggles. This charge had the effect, among other things, of making Orang Asli informants and other related activists cautious in speaking of their relations with extra-village non-governmental agencies.

Given these state-impositions, but also because of their own wariness of "newcomer-outsiders" to their villages, the Orang Asli themselves posed some obstacles of their own in the process of my fieldwork. When I finally secured the permission of one village in which to stay and conduct my fieldwork, certain conditions were laid down as to how I should go about my business. Among other things, I was not to bring with me any writing or recording equipment during my interactions with the villagers. Wah Kawat, the "gatekeeper" who facilitated my entry into the village was bluntly clear from the outset that I should not behave towards the villagers as if the latter were "laboratory specimens" for my research. The rule forbidding me the use of recording equipment was waived after about three months from my first arrival to the village. All the villagers were aware that I was pursuing my research but I was requested not to "act like a researcher". As a mai pesuek (visitor-inhabitant) I was expected to cultivate cordial ties with the villagers, participate in certain village affairs and show an interest in the concerns of my "adopted" family. Thus my methods of data collection at least in those first few months in the village can be described as participatory-observation and informal conversations during the course of daily/seasonal activities of my informants. In all, my stay in the village was about seven months.

Prior to my stay in this village I had conducted a survey of the 61 Orang Asli villages in the District of Batang Padang (Map...). The survey was intended as part of sampling procedures for community and informant selection. It was necessary to first define all the relevant and operational units of the Orang Asli population vis-a-vis the research questions and then to select
one ethnographic community for participant observation and data-collection. The main reason for choosing this district was that the first "public" activities of the Orang Asli movement - the Orang Asli Youth Conference of 1980 and the Orang Asli Headmen's Conference of 1982 - were organized primarily by Semai villagers from this district.

In November 1993, I began visiting various Orang Asli villages in different geographical parts of Batang Padang. I introduced myself to the village headman in some villages while in others I was introduced by local researchers, Christian workers, NGO members and a Special Branch Police Officer, all of whom were working in some capacity with Orang Asli in those villages. Preliminary information about the villages was gathered using the following three criteria:

1. the extent of the linkages with POASM or any other NGOs: did village representatives attend any meetings, participate in any POASM/NGO-related campaigns/activities, and if so how often and who represented the community?;

2. the status of the community: are there any discrepancies or conflicts between the administrative principles/boundaries of the formal village community and their own traditional boundaries/principles of community; if so what is the nature of the discrepancy/conflict?; and

3. the food supply system: do they procure their food by way of the traditional subsistence type, the non-traditional market-dependant-, or mixed-type system?

These criteria were chosen following the working hypotheses of this research:

1. that socio-cultural and historical processes specific to Orang Asli identity and social relations are at play in their political movement and struggles; and

2. that tradition was reclaimed and employed as current strategies.

Thus, while the first criterion indicates the political participation in the movement, the second and third criteria indicate two basic "traditional" features of Orang Asli community life. At the same time, the use of these three criteria will indicate the conflict-areas allowing for more insights into the processes of socio-economic, cultural and political changes. In this preliminary survey, I also wished to know the general terms the Orang Asli villagers use to define and describe changes they were experiencing and to identify Orang Asli communities on the basis of these definitions as to the range and extent of changes. And to identify the Orang Asli
perceptions on community boundaries in lieu of the formal boundaries such as *Daerah* (District), *Mukim* (Sub-District), *kampung* (village), *pos* (post) etc. - these features themselves representing indicators of change. Finally, this survey could bring insights not anticipated in the original research design.

By the end of December 1993 I had visited a total of twenty-seven villages. As for those villages not visited (there are sixty-one villages in all in this District) due to constraints of resources in terms of time, funds, transport or assisting personnel, various NGO workers, Christian missionaries, researchers, security personnel and JHEOA Field Officers who are familiar with the Orang Asli villages were consulted to provide information about the latter. In this way preliminary information of all the sixty-one villages in the District was gathered vis-a-vis their linkages with POASM/NGOs, the community-status and their food supply system.

Despite all my methodologically informed selection process to find an ethnographic community I had to settle for the one village that was willing to accept my presence in their midst. From this village base, however, I had free access to two other villages in the vicinity, one situated just beside the village I stayed in and the other about thirty minutes walk away. I also had to abide by certain rules of interaction, which in a sense dictated the methods I used in data collection with the villages. As mentioned earlier, the method can be described as informal conversations in the course of some joint activity. Working through the many conversations I would then seek out specific individuals and groups to pursue further interactions with them to make up for the in-depth interviews which I had originally planned but could not carry out. These "interviews" include the ones I had with the headmen of the villages, village committees members, the core group members of the women's network, representatives of the Catholic, Methodist and Baha'i religious networks as well as some villagers who have "left the faith", the village lay-leader of the Catholic group, the ex-lay leaders of all three religious groups, the *tok halaal* (one who communicates with the world of the "spirits"); the *raknak* (elders) of two descent groups; two men who had served in the *Senoi Praaq* (fighting Senoi) and the oldest husband-wife couple in the village. Apart from seeking out these individuals for the unstructured conversation-type interviews, I also repeatedly visited seven more cooperative households to talk about their household incomes. These included the household I was a part of.
As for the various extra-village networks I conducted interviews with one Special Branch Officer who had previously overseered security arrangements in Orang Asli villages, a Special Branch officer who is currently assigned Orang Asli surveillance duties, two representatives from POASM, a researcher actively involved with POASM campaigns, two full-time activists of the NGO that works on Orang Asli concerns, three church workers, a JHEOA field assistant and a retired JHEOA officer, and five village leaders from other Orang Asli villagers in the district who are active in the movement, a businessman who had previously carried out logging operations in Orang Asli areas and two middle-men traders in Orang Asli products. The method of interviewing these contributors was informal and unstructured. All these contributors were aware that I was conducting a research on the "problems" of the Orang Asli and they were willing to share their ideas on how the Orang Asli can and should enjoy the fruits of development and modernization.

The process of compiling the database for this research was also greatly helped by participant-observations especially in some unexpected happenings during the course of my fieldwork. First, in the context of the UN International Year of Indigenous Peoples various governmental and non-governmental were organizing meetings and campaigns of sorts at different times and places. Representatives from the village I was researching participated in the aforementioned events in various ways. As such, these happenings were opportunities to observe and gather information regarding the processual linkages between village and extra-village agencies. Another significant event during my period of fieldwork was the Malaysian state and federal general elections scheduled for the end of 1994. The prospect of the general elections prompted the members of the research-villages to organize a special campaign to highlight their land problem to the government. The campaign involved the writing-up of a special memorandum that the villagers intended to submit to the government on the eve of the general elections. I shall elaborate more fully on the details of this memorandum campaign in the subsequent chapters. For now, suffice to say that the processes and dynamics surrounding this long-drawn out campaign as well as the memorandum-text itself provided the most invaluable information in terms of the questions of this research. Wah K Kawat, who eventually became the main scribe of the memorandum and leader of the campaign, borrowed my tape-recorder and conducted oral-history interviews with different villagers. These tape-recordings as
well as the un-edited version of the memorandum, which were made available to me, provided a rich source of information regarding the history of the social relations of these particular villages, vis-a-vis the land issue. The production of this memorandum also brought to light other issues related to the research. Information regarding the specific dynamics with regard to the material and ideational flows between the ethnographic community and other agencies, the gender dimensions of the land struggle, intra- and inter-village conflicts and cooperations etc. were explicitated in many forms.

If observation was necessary and extremely helpful, the collection of oral narratives/histories was a deliberate strategy in data collection. Oral interviews are especially valuable and necessary for uncovering indigenous people's perspectives. Many researchers have observed how the expression of the indigenous unique experience as indigenous is often muted, particularly in any situation where their interests are at variance with the dominant society. An indigenous person's narration of her/his life may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives one framed in concepts and values that reflect the dominant society's position in society and one more informed by the more immediate realities of their personal experience. Where experience does fit dominant meanings alternative concepts will often reveal the indigenous life-world views. Inadvertently, indigenous persons often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly accepted terms of prevailing concepts and conventions. To hear indigenous peoples' perspectives accurately, we have to listen and listen again, receiving both the dominant and muted messages clearly and hoping to differentiate the two. Researchers experienced in oral history methods, especially feminist scholars (Gluck & Patai, 1991) realizing the many possibilities of the oral history method have argued for a necessary shift in methodology from merely information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction where the focus is on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint:

It is the interactive nature of the interview that allows us to ask for clarification, to notice what questions the subject formulates about her own life, to go behind conventional, expected answers to the woman's personal construction of her own experience. This shift of focus from data gathering to interactive process affects what the researcher regards as valuable information... (Anderson & Jack, 1994:23)

During the first three months, I could not take notes or tape recordings in the presence of villagers. However, all conversations/observations were written down as soon as possible and as
accurately as I could remember them. As such there are quotations in this study which are not verbatim translations. In this text I have, following Caunce (1994) opted to use the term "contributor" rather than the "informant" when referring to the "interviewee". As for the language used during the fieldwork, I began with Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) which all the villagers are not only proficient in but the vocabulary of which is mixed with the Sengoi language they speak. But in the course of my stay in the village I found a Sengoi language teacher in Wah Kawat. The Sengoi language varies in dialect from one river-basin settlement to another. As Wah Kawat put it asik teow asik basa (different river different language). As such she suggested that I use the "standardized" Sengoi dictionary published in 1986 in my language lessons. The work on the dictionary was begun by Paul Means in 1930, a Methodist missionary who worked with the Sengoi of Batang Padang. He continued working on the dictionary after he became a professor at the University of Oregon with the assistance of his wife Nathalie Means, a Sorbonne trained linguist. They worked with several Sengoi contributors from the Batang Padang District and when Paul Means died in 1980 Nathalie continued the work with 4 Sengoi contributors. In this text, therefore, I shall follow the orthography of this Sengoi dictionary (Means, 1986).

A word about the style of writing in this text. Like other authors (cfr. Tsing, 1993) who had wished to write a "politically correct" ethnography of the "other" I had the problem of, among other things, choosing the tense of my account. Do I write in the "ethnographic present" and convey a picture of the "timeless" Orang Asli or use the past tense which may represent the Orang Asli as "museum pieces"? My way out of this dilemma is to clarify the time frameworks of the events and processes I am referring to in the hope that, whichever tense I choose to use, the reader will recognize the time-situatedness of whatever ethnographic stories I tell.

Finally, to respect the requests from the villagers as well as to follow what I had planned anyway in line with oral interview methods, I shall use fictitious names for all persons and places except for the major towns and "public" figures.
Basic Descriptions of the Semai Villages and their Environment

Although I gathered much information from several villages, the three Semai villages particularly dealt with in this study are Canu, Pendue and Ini. They are located in the District of Batang Padang, one of nine administrative Districts in the state of Perak (Map...). As Map... shows the settlement sites as well as the villagers' customary lands are all situated on portions of the Legep River drainage area. The villages and the Semai rubber-smallholdings occupy three of several clearings in the area which forms the lower slopes of forest-covered hills that rise into the Central Mountain Range. Canu and Ini are situated next to each other with a two-metre tarred road serving as a boundary between them, while Pendue is located about two and a half kilometres upstream the Legep. Other clearings in the area are occupied by several Chinese small-farms, a private cattle rearing project on disused tin-mining land, a quarrying operation and a private-owned oil palm plantation. The road which divides Canu and Ini is also the only access road leading to the small town of Kota some eight kilometers to the west of the Canu. As one travels down the road to Kota the first kilometre or so of the road after leaving Canu is flanked by rubber trees of a private plantation. The road then passes through a disused tin-mining land for another kilometre and a half before it passes through two Malay villages and their rubber smallholdings. A kilometre away from these villages is a small housing estate situated just off the road. From there on the road is flanked by more rubber trees until about a kilometre from the fringe of the town where another housing estate is situated. The road itself is marked with many potholes caused by heavy lorries regularly ferrying rocks from the quarry located a kilometre and half to the northeast of Canu. A major portion of the Semai customary lands is located within the confines of the State Forest Reserves, the boundaries of which lie some two kilometres east of Canu. In terms of Malaysian land laws, the Semai villages as well as the private-owned farms and quarrying operations are occupying land that is classified as TOL (temporary occupation licence) land. But at the same time the land on which the Semai villages and their rubber smallholdings are located are also designated, in terms of Aboriginal Peoples' Act 1954 (revised 1974), as an Aboriginal Area.

The Semai villagers' houses are built on stilts and constructed from wood, bamboo and attap (dried palm tree leaves) roofs, materials gathered from the forest. In the 1960s, the JHEOA (Department of Aboriginal Affairs) provided the villagers with processed timber wood and zinc
roofing material that was used to enlarge their houses. Typical to these villages are therefore houses that are constructed from processed timber and zinc in the front portion of the house and wood, bamboo and attap in the back portion.

All three villagers have piped water leading to their houses. The system was constructed by the villagers themselves but with material and know-how provided by the Federal Ministry of Health. It consists of an about two-kilometre long PVC piping, of about 15 centimetres in diameter, channeling water from a nearby waterfall, about 10 metres higher than the site of the villagers. As the main pipe reaches the kampungs, water is rechanneled into some two hundred smaller pipes leading to various households, each of the households having a single tap placed outside the house. Given that there is no electrical pump-system, the water flows on its own force of gravity. Even during periods of heavy rains, each household is able to collect only sufficient water to supply their daily cooking and drinking needs. Moreover, the main piping, given that it is about a decade old and exposed to the weathering effects of the natural elements, is punctured at different points in its length, which further adversely affects the water pressure. Therefore, the villagers still rely heavily on the water supply from the rivers, located between one to two kilometres away depending on the different villages.

Only two of the three villages i.e. Canu and Ini, have electricity supply to their homes. Pendue villagers could not afford the money needed to install the necessary cable lines, a requirement by the National Electricity Board for electricity to be supplied.

In terms of other social infrastructure, there was a school set up by the state in the 1960s catering for primary grade school children but it was discontinued some years later because of a shortage of teaching staff. Currently, school-going children travel to the town of Kota for their primary education. Of the schooling-aged children, about 55% of them do attend school. Of this number, about 75% drop out of school by the age of 15. Of those who continue, only 2% succeed in passing the final examinations of high school.

In the 1950s-1960s, mobile health services were regularly made accessible to these villagers but they were discontinued by the end of that decade. Villagers who need medical services for minor ailments travel to a public clinic located in the town of Kota. For more serious ailments and in-patient treatment, they travel to the public hospital in the town of Tapah which is about 35 kilometres away. Often, however, given their reluctance to visit general
public hospitals, the villagers travel to Kuala Lumpur (about 150 kilometres away) to receive medical service at the Orang Asli Hospital run by the JHEOA.

The population of the kampungs are as follows. In Canu there are 89 households comprising 456 persons, in Pendue 21 households of 209 persons and I'nı 61 households of 343 persons. Of the total 726 inhabitants of the three kampungs there are 412 persons above the age of 18 (211 male and 201 female) and 314 below the age of 18 (169 males and 145 males). 87 adults are salariat, 59 with the public sector (all males) and 28 in the private (15 women and 13 men). The others are engaged in village/forest related economic activities including occasional contract-waged employment with plantations or in construction.

In terms of religion, 30% of the population in Canu have embraced Christianity (Catholic and Methodist), 9% Baha'i, 2% Muslim and the rest adhere to their collection of traditional beliefs and practices which are referred to as the adat, a Malay term meaning "custom". In Pendue, 3% of the villagers have embraced Islam while the rest adhere to the adat. In I'nı, 76% have embraced the Baha'i religion, 5% Islam, 2% Christianity and the rest adhere to the adat. Moreover, except for a handful of devout Baha'i followers in I'nı all the villagers of whatever religious persuasion continue to adhere to the adat as well.

**On the Structure of the Thesis**

In the chapters that follow, Chapter Two is theoretical and outlines some basic concepts which were employed to organize and interpret the data collected. In this chapter I suggest that some key notions and social practices of this specific Orang Asli group provide a useful framework for conceptualising the land rights struggle as well as its implications on the changing social relations of the Orang Asli. These notions and practices, however, need to be articulated in a more analytic fashion and to this end I draw from recent discussions on similar themes in the field of human/cultural/feminist geography. Chapters Three and Four examines the changing nature and extent of land rights enjoyed by the Orang Asli from the period of colonial rule to the present day. In Chapter Three I look at colonial politics, the British land practices in particular, and the effects of these on Orang Asli land rights. Chapter Four analyses how and why Orang Asli land rights were more significantly transformed during and after the
period of the Communists armed struggle in Malaya. In both chapters particular attention is given to the interplay between norms and social practices surrounding the specific Orang Asli group of this study. Chapters Five and Six describe contemporary Orang Asli relations and the role the land rights struggle play in constituting and transforming those relations. Chapter Five looks at the economics of their land struggle while Chapter Six is on the political realignments in the villages as a result of the emerging Orang Asli movement. Finally, in Chapter Seven I return to some of the questions of theoretical constructions and concept formation. Drawing upon the findings in Chapters Three to Six I shall accordingly summarise the conceptual framework and examine the possibilities in explaining other indigenous land rights struggles with a similar approach.