

Paths of Change in Fields of Power

*A study of the Chewong
– an indigenous minority group
in peninsular Malaysia*

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Summary

The term Orang Asli translates as “original people”, and is a generic term for 18 indigenous minority groups in Peninsular Malaysia. In this thesis I examine some of the recent changes that have taken place among the Chewong, one of the smallest Orang Asli groups. My empirical data from 2005 is compared with Signe Howell’s writings based on a number of studies among the same group since the late 1970s. I have looked at four main areas of change; education, economy, health and religion. The local changes – attributable to increased interaction with the outside society – are examined in relation to a wider politico-historical framework of structural power. I am arguing that a lack of recognition of the Orang Asli as a people and a failure to recognize their needs and rights have important repercussions for the course of change in the Chewong society. The government’s policies for assimilation and the dominant development discourse put a strong pressure on the Chewong and other Orang Asli to leave their indigenous cultural identities behind and assimilate into the dominant Malay group. Notions of cultural superiority can be detected both in formal and informal relationships between the Chewong and outside agents.

Because the traditional Chewong areas partly overlap with the Krau Wildlife Reserve, the group has been lucky to retain access to a large portion of their ancestral land. While some of the Chewong prefer to continue their autonomous lives deep inside the rain forest, others have settled at the village on the fringe of the forest and, in various degrees, have been part of the new developments brought about by an opening up of the area through deforestation and road extensions. However, the Chewong lack the possibilities and rights to partake in the new opportunities on equal terms with the dominant groups, and thus tend to end up in a subordinate position in encounters with outside agents and institutions. Simultaneously, the previously crucial cosmological prescriptions and traditions embedded in forest localities seem to be of decreasing importance to the inhabitants of the main fringe village. These cultural changes have an impact on social relations of sharing and equality, and leave the villagers vulnerable for further assimilation pressure.

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1 Introduction

The Chewong and the Orang Asli

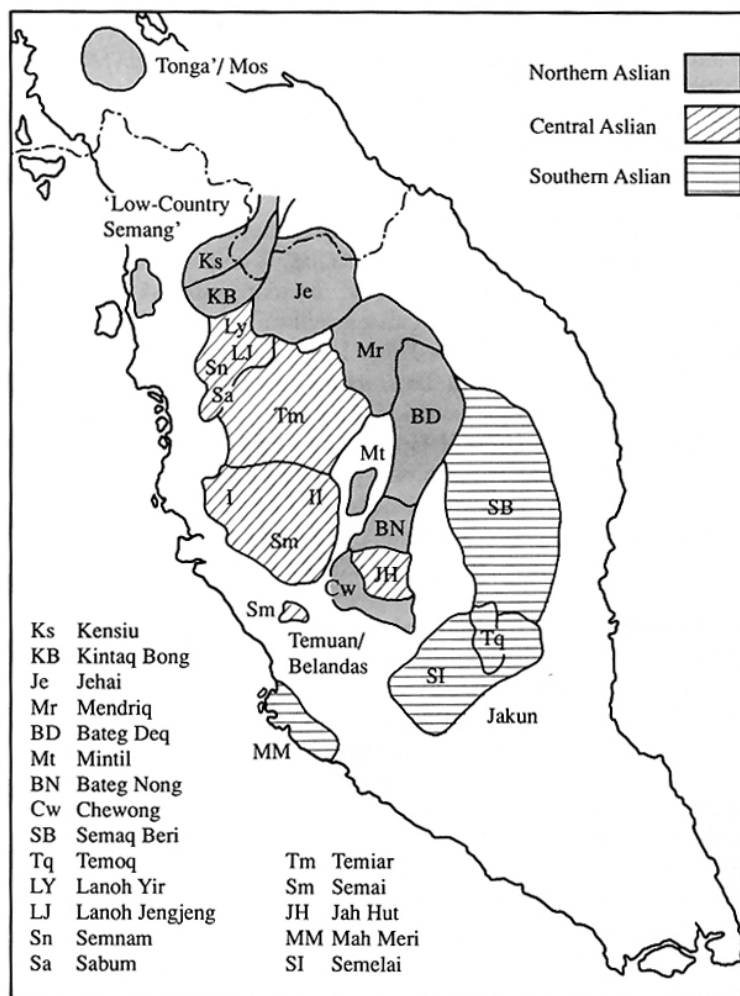
The Orang Asli are the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. The term Orang Asli translates as “original people”, and is a generic term for 18 culturally and linguistically different sub-groups, officially classified for administrative purposes under Negrito, Senoi and Aboriginal Malay. The Orang Asli number almost 150 000 individuals, representing a mere 0,6 per cent of the Malaysian population (Nicholas 2000, Nicholas & Baer 2004). My interest in the Orang Asli was triggered as I read Signe Howell’s 1995 article “The Indigenous People of Malaysia: It’s now or too late”, an article which points to some of the political challenges facing the Orang Asli today. The Orang Asli issue seemed to have all the features that interested me academically; development, assimilation, minority-majority relations, power inequalities and marginality. Only later was I to understand how emotionally engaging these issues become after a personal encounter with some of the people concerned.

As I was interested in processes of change I was encouraged by Howell to do my fieldwork among the Chewong, the group she has been working with for over two decades. It was a good advice, as Howell’s writings and analysis of the Chewong lives in the late 1970s and early 1980s provided me with detailed comparative materials to investigate changes in their society. The Chewong group consists of about 250 persons.¹ The large majority of the group reside in the south and south-west parts of the Krau Wildlife Reserve in the state of Pahang. This group is referred to as the Eastern Chewong by Howell (1989a). A smaller portion of the Chewong lives further north-west, in the Ulu Dong area between Raub and Kuala Lipis. I visited some of them in the villages of Batu Cendal and Ulu Dong. Bringing along some Eastern Chewong, I soon found that they had little knowledge of each other, in spite of a common language and some known common ancestors. The focus of this study is the Eastern Chewong only.

¹ The number is my own calculation based on personal observations and relevant literature, as no reliable official survey is available.

The largest Chewong settlement is situated on the border of the Krau Wildlife Reserve, and this village called Kuala Gandah constitutes my main field site. However, further along the border of the Reserve and along the interior rivers several smaller settlements are found. I counted about 15 interior hamlets, most of them consisting of one extended family only. The Chewong are mobile and move frequently, and each family is autonomous in this regard. They are hunter and gatherers and shifting cultivators, but depend increasingly on rice and purchased foodstuff.

Map 1:
Malay Peninsula:
Location of Orang Asli groups and Distribution of Aslian Languages
(Approximate)



The map is reproduced from Howell 1989a:7. At the present time most Orang Asli occupy smaller and more discontinuous territories than what is shown here.

Analytical framework: power and socio-cultural change

The topic of this thesis presented itself to me as I got to know the Chewong and their society. Having read Signe Howell's writings about the Chewong, I came to Kuala Gandah with a set of expectations of what would meet me at the fringe of the Malaysian rainforest. However, I soon realised that the society had been through significant changes since Howell did her main fieldwork in 1977-79², and it instantly intrigued me to find out more about these changes. *An overall objective for this thesis will be to analyse the relationship between internal and external factors as initiators of change, and to examine which is more influential in shaping the trajectory of the Chewong society.* In order to grasp this topic for investigation, I have formulated the following research questions:

- What are the main changes that have taken place among the Chewong since the late 1970s?
- Why have these rapid and significant changes taken place?
- Are the Chewong active participants in changing their society, or powerless victims of outside encroachment?
- How do the recent changes interact with the indigenous Chewong traditions?
- And finally, how do the changes affect the path ahead for the Chewong?

Obviously, Chewong society has not been static up to a certain point in time when things suddenly began to change. It is out of pragmatic considerations that I chose to compare today's situation with the situation 25 years ago, as Howell's documentation of the Chewong way of life at that time provides an excellent point of departure for exploring changes up till today. In doing so, I hope to act in accordance with Wolf's call for cumulative knowledge building:

² Howell has since then been back to the Chewong on several occasions, recently in 2001, and I have benefited from her numerous writings based on her follow-up visits and her long-term relationship with the group.

I think that it is the task of anthropology – or at least the task of some anthropologists – to attempt explanation ... I also believe that the search for explanation in anthropology can be cumulative; that knowledge and insights gained in the past can generate new questions, and that new departures can incorporate the accomplishments of the past. (Wolf 2001:386)

By comparing my own observations with Howell's descriptions I have identified major economic, social and cultural changes in the Chewong society. In the book *A Line of Power* (1984), Andrew Strathern rejects the distinction between culture and society, and argues that a combination of cultural and sociological analysis is the best means to understand processes of change. Thus, in my analysis of the Chewong society I will pay attention to both aspects of change. Based on Bernard & Peltó (1987) I understand socio-cultural change to be changes in the patterns of recurrent behaviours in human social interaction, and modification – loss, addition, or transformation – of values, beliefs, attitudes, or other ideational elements. As my analysis proceeds it will become clear how these different aspects of change are intricately interwoven in the Chewong case.

Moreover, I was interested in exploring the forces instigating change and shaping the trajectory of the developments. It seemed clear to me that much of the recent changes were a result of increased interaction with the wider society outside the Chewong group. Deforestation and road building has opened up the fringe village of Kuala Gandah, and the subsequent intensification of cultural contact has led to an unprecedented rapidity of socio-cultural change. By observing the relations between the Chewong and outside agents, I soon recognized patterns of dominance and subordination. Many outsiders held perceptions of the Chewong as inferior and backward. While some visitors took advantage of their dominant position in trade, others came with patronizing ideas and an aim of developing “these uncivilized people”, as one of the Christian missionaries put it.

According to Colin Nicholas (2000:102), the government's policies towards the Orang Asli involve *domination* (one community takes control of the other), *paternalism* (one society governs the other in what it views as being the other's best interest), and *integration* (which occurs when single institutions are developed and ethnic origin ceases to be recognized), all which occur within a general framework of *assimilation* (which in turn involves an internalization of the values of the dominant or majority group).

Increased contact with the outside societies imposes restrictions and provides opportunities for the Chewong, who consequently have ambivalent feelings towards the changes. Whereas proximity to the Malays – the politically dominant majority group in Malaysia, and the Chewong’s most significant other – is generally abhorred, the new opportunities arising from increased interaction are also recognized. Some of the Chewong grasp this chance by getting paid work, entering into trade relations, taking advantage of medical facilities and sending their children to school. Others choose to avoid outsiders as much as possible. The majority, though, pragmatically balance contact and avoidance.

Structural power and recognitional domination

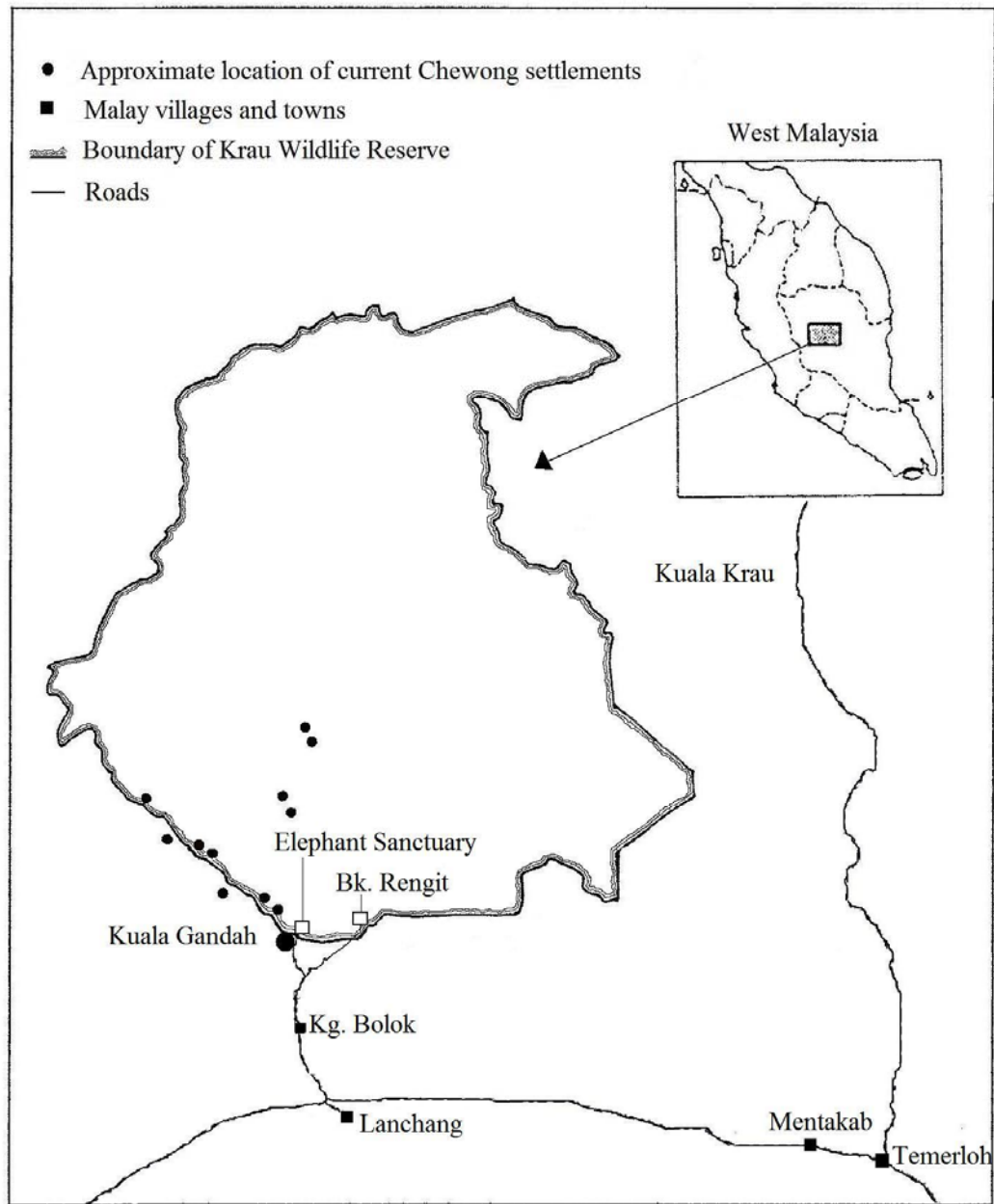
In order to understand the recent changes in the Chewong society, it is essential to identify the external forces that build up a framework of power within which the Chewong live. Historical and political circumstances are important aspects of what Wolf (1994:218-219) calls structural power; “power that not only operates within settings or domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves”. When analysing power, Lukes (2005:25) argues, one must pose “...the question of control over the agenda of politics and of the way in which potential issues are kept out of the political process”. Lukes also points to one of the most important signs of power; the power to act in another way. Thus, he argues, abstention or non-intervention can be a form of power if one could have acted differently. Take as an example the current schooling-situation in Kuala Gandah. Whether the children go to school partly depends on economy and transportation possibilities. Through simple means the government could have encouraged attendance – if the will was there. However, they do not intervene.

The political power in Malaysia is context-transcending; it can produce outcomes over a wide range of possible circumstances³. This ability, I will argue, is fortified by a widespread public agreement on some central discourses. Assumptions and prejudices that see the Orang Asli as backward find resonance in the dominant national idea of “development”. Anne Katrine Larsen (2002) shows how this

³ The limitations of Malaysia’s democracy with its relatively repressive state apparatus have been indicated by several researchers (e.g. Case 1992, Hilley 2001)

development discourse is shared among the various levels of Malay citizens, from official representatives to common village people. Characterizing the development discourse is a dichotomy between the forest (*hutan*) and the village (*kampung*), where the village represents areas cleared of forest and thus “developed” (ibid). As the Orang Asli is closely attached to the forest, they are seen as “not yet developed” by the dominant groups. Together with the political aim of assimilation, these representations portray the Orang Asli as a people in need of modernization, which can be defined as replacement of “traditional” cultures with “modern” cultures (Nicholas 2000:44). In the Chewong situation, such ideas of cultural and epistemological superiority can above all be recognized among the missionaries, in the school system, and in the public health system, but also among private people such as the Malay neighbours of Kuala Gandah. Lukes (2005:120) calls this identity-related form of power *recognitional domination*. He argues that domination in respect of identity can take several forms, whereas insufficient recognition is one of them. He finds support from Charles Taylor; “projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized ... withholding recognition can be a form of oppression” (Taylor 1992, cited in Lukes 2005:119). I will argue that a lack of recognition of the Orang Asli and their rights has led to Malay dominance over the Orang Asli. On a local level, this lack of recognition has important impacts on the course of change in the Chewong society. Although the Chewong are skeptical to the Malays and other outsiders, they look with fascination upon some of the developments representing modernity. When such a fascination is coupled with a lack of possibilities to partake in the developments on equal terms with the dominant groups, this can lead to a willing submission to agents and institutions associated with the larger world, a dynamic Knauf (2002) calls *recessive agency*. Some of the Chewong seem to follow such a pattern, while others hold their autonomy high and continue their lives in the deep forest only to come out for trade and purchase of goods.

Map 2:
Krau Wildlife Reserve:
Indication of Chewong settlements



Kuala Gandah – an interface village

Kuala Gandah is by far the largest Chewong settlement, consisting of around 18 families and a hundred individuals. It is situated at the fringe of the Malaysian rainforest in the state of Pahang, and is frequently visited by outsiders such as

missionaries, health workers, tourists and others. In the outskirts of the village there is a preschool, a Muslim prayer hall, and a small shop. During the time of Howell's first research among the Chewong, in 1977-79, one had to walk by foot ten kilometres from the Malay village of Bolok to reach Kuala Gandah. The relative isolation of the original settlement, then called Gandah⁴, started to break down as the forest was logged and new roads were built. One of the first major impacts this opening up of the area had on the Chewong was the establishment of the Kuala Gandah Elephant Conservation Centre in 1989. The Elephant Sanctuary was built on the site of the Chewong settlement, forcing the inhabitants to move a couple hundred meters across the river and establish a new settlement, today's Kuala Gandah. Managed by the Malaysian Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), the Elephant Sanctuary is a protection and translocation centre for wild elephants whose original habitats have been logged for plantations. Since 1997 the Sanctuary has been open to tourists; leading to even further developments in the area. On the Sanctuary's website they point to their proximity to the Chewong, which they describe as "the last tribe of its kind in Malaysia".⁵ As a result, local and foreign tourists on their way to and from the Elephant Sanctuary frequently drop by the village of Kuala Gandah to see this "last tribe of its kind". All too often are the Chewong treated by the tourists as figures on display – objects for photography and excitement – much like the elephants across the river. Kuala Gandah's exposure to outsiders is strongly contrasted by the relatively isolated settlements inside the forest. Because of the existence of the Krau Wildlife Reserve, permission is needed from the DWNP to enter the forested areas. Partly for this reason, in addition to its geographical inaccessibility, the Chewong settlements inside are hardly ever visited by outsiders.

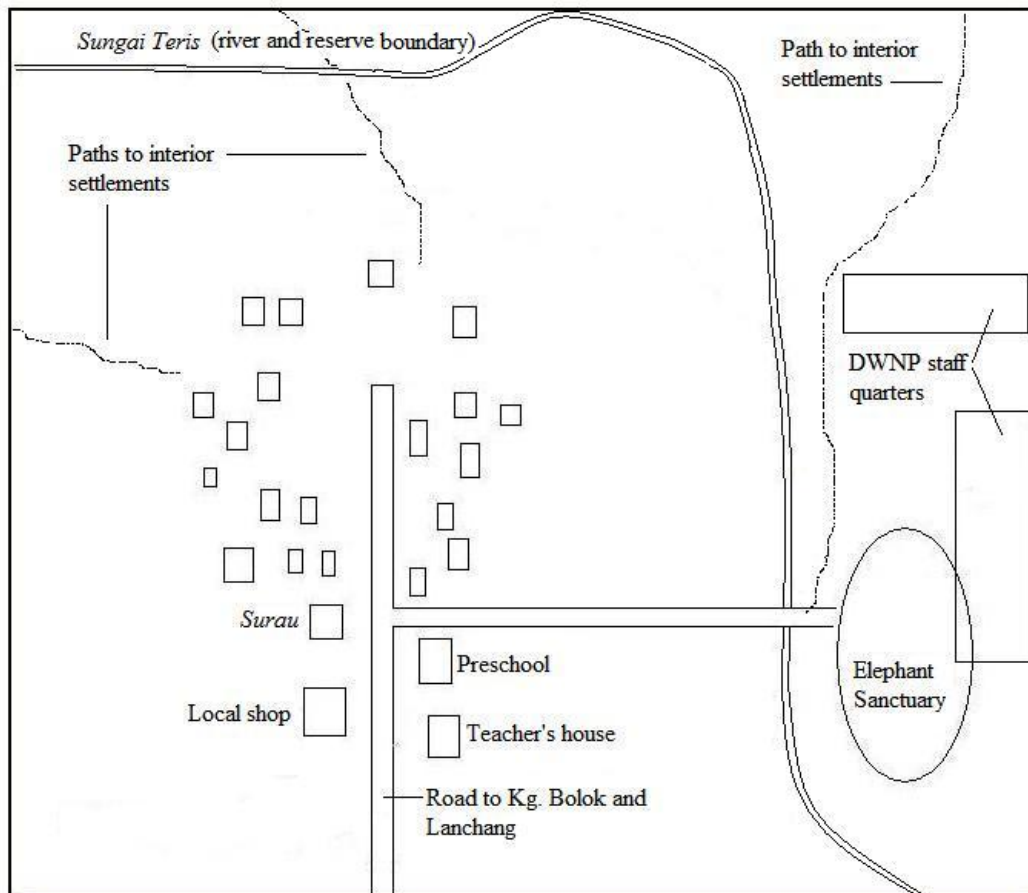
Kuala Gandah serves as a gateway village, a place of entrance and exit for the people inside when they go to town to buy their necessities. As one would expect, the changes are greater in Kuala Gandah than in the settlements inside. In Kuala Gandah, some of the children go to school, either Preschool in the village or Primary School in Bolok. Of the 18 families in Kuala Gandah, nine have converted to Islam and six to

⁴ Gandah is the name of a small stream running nearby the village of Kuala Gandah. *Kuala* is Malay and means "confluence of two rivers". The official name of the village is *Kampung Sungai Enggang*, which refers to the nearby river (*sungai*) Enggang. The Chewong, however, use the name *Ngang* (Enggang) to refer to a small settlement further downstream this river. I have therefore decided to use the name *Kuala Gandah* in my thesis, as this was the name the Chewong used in their conversations with me.

⁵ <http://www.myelephants.org/kghistory.html> [downloaded 13.02.2006]

Christianity. Missionaries from both religions visit regularly. Health personnel from the nearest clinic come once a month and traditional Chewong healing rituals are rare. People in Kuala Gandah practice hunting, gathering and cultivation less than those inside, and rely more on purchased foodstuff. In addition, they have developed a craving for material goods sold in nearby shops, and are consequently in an endless search for money. The increased monetization was also noted by Howell two decades ago, but since then the dependency on purchased goods has increased continuously.

Map 3:
Kuala Gandah



To grasp the significance of Kuala Gandah's strategic location as an intersection between the outside world and the more isolated inside settlements, I find Norman Long's notion of *interface* fruitful. Long uses this concept to describe "a critical point of intersection or linkage between different social systems, fields or levels of social

order, where structural discontinuities, based upon differences of normative value and social interest, are most likely to be found" (Long 1989:2). In Long's use of the term, "fields of interface" does not necessarily refer to spatial locations, but rather to the social processes resulting from the encounter between different social systems. These situations are usually seen to entail inequalities of power, which in turn can cause marginalization of the weaker part. In the Chewong case, Kuala Gandah can be seen as a spatial as well as a social point of interface where such processes take place.

Seeing Kuala Gandah as an interface village in this light, I will now relate the story of a family's choice to move from Kuala Gandah back into the forest. The story will work as an introduction to the field site, my main informants, and some of their concerns. Additionally, I find the anecdote to be analytically thought-provoking as it points to elements of cultural resilience and continuity in the face of significant socio-cultural changes. In the course of the narrative I will present some theoretical issues with relevance for the thesis.

A return to the forest

My main fieldwork was carried out from February to July 2005, with a return visit in December the same year. During the fieldwork I was accommodated with a family in Kuala Gandah. Their house was traditionally built by various materials such as rattan and bamboo collected from the forest. The house had a kitchen and a combined living room and bedroom. It was built on stilts allowing cool air from below to penetrate the bamboo floor while smoke from the hearth smoothly disappeared through the thatched roof. The family consisted of Deh and Mar with children, children-in-law, and grandchildren. As I will repeatedly refer to this family in the course of the thesis, a short introduction is necessary. Deh and Mar have eight children, the eldest one is Jirai, turning 28, and the youngest is Raman (Man), 9 years old. Jirai is married to Ganding and they have three children. They stay in a house next to Deh and Mar. The two eldest sons – Sulaiman and Ruhil – also have their own families, with two children each. Sulaiman and his family stay in a neighbouring house, while Ruhil, his Jah Hut⁶ wife Norana, and their children reside together with Deh and Mar (as they

⁶ Jah Hut is another Orang Asli group. The Chewong have occasionally intermarried with people from this adjacent group.

recently returned from Norana's village and have not built their own house yet). One son; Ameer (17), and two daughters; Noni (16) and Tiara (13), are still unmarried, but sleep in a separate house while still eating together with their parents. The two youngest sons, Hamid (10) and Raman (9), stay with Deh and Mar.

When I write about the Chewong, I will use the names by which I know them. It was common among the Chewong to be known by several names. Deh, for example, is called Deh by her family and most of the villagers. However, some called her Dell, and in addition she had a Malay name; Bida. It was some time in the 1990's – when the request for ID registrations commenced – that the Chewong were told to take Malay names. The Preschool teacher, with connections to the Department for Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), generously provided the villagers of Kuala Gandah with new names. Deh was called Bida, Jirai was called Juliza, and so forth. When I first came to Kuala Gandah, these were the names they introduced themselves with. As time passed by and I got intimate with some of the villagers I started to use their Chewong names, but with some it felt natural to go on as before. Thus, in this thesis I will use a combination of Malay and Chewong names, as I did during my fieldwork.

Deh and Mar's extended family have been residing in Kuala Gandah for several years. When I came back to Malaysia for a follow-up fieldwork in December 2005, I was therefore surprised to learn that Deh and Mar and their unmarried children had moved. They had set up new houses inside the forest; about 30 minutes walk from Kuala Gandah.

Change and Continuity

By maintaining a research interest in the Chewong for over twenty years, Signe Howell has been able to conduct longitudinal studies of their society. One of the processes she has analysed is what she calls *withdrawal*. When she visited Kuala Gandah in 1991, she found a situation marked by rapid change. The JHEOA had encouraged establishments of fruit and rubber orchards in order to promote cash economy among the Chewong, and had built six wooden houses and some latrines, provided piped water and promised electricity and healthcare in order to have the Chewong move out of the forest and settle permanently in Kuala Gandah. Many Chewong adhered to the JHEOA's request, but the orchards were soon left

overgrown. Moving out of the forest led to changes in lifestyle, and in Howell's words; "The scene seemed set for the familiar process of acculturation, disorientation, and consumerism" (Howell 2001:153). Surprisingly then, on Howell's return in 1997 she found the village of Kuala Gandah virtually abandoned, as people had moved back into the forest. Howell argues that "the Chewong have performed, and continue to perform, a cultural choice to abandon the experiment of settling down on the fringes of the jungle..." (Howell 2002:262). When I arrived in 2005, Kuala Gandah had grown to around 18 families, pointing to a dialectic and reversible development of the residence pattern. Deh and Mar's decision to move back into the forest is thus part of this dialectic process. Howell's description of the discrepancies in lifestyle resembles my observation of Deh's family after their "withdrawal". The move entailed a return to traditional daily chores. Hunting and cultivating increased, although supplemented by purchased food items. The young boys, who tended to be lazy and uninterested in Kuala Gandah, now went eagerly into the forest for hunting. The girls made their own small fields with tubers and vegetables, supervised by the trained eye of their mother Deh. Occasionally, the girls tried their luck with the blowpipe as well. Howell also describes how cosmologically based prescriptions and proscriptions were invoked more inside the forest than it was in Kuala Gandah, but I did not spend enough time inside to be able to investigate such processes. However, when I commented on my impression of a significantly different lifestyle between the forest and Kuala Gandah, Deh agreed, and declared that the youngsters were shy (*malu*) in Kuala Gandah. They were afraid that outsiders would see them performing traditional activities such as blowpipe hunting, she said. My previous observations from Kuala Gandah indicate that this shyness is not only limited to the youngsters. For example, I saw a mother in her thirties hide the bird she was preparing for dinner when some tourists came by, explaining to me that she did not want them to see her eating it. Howell argues that the effects of a reorientation towards the social life that used to be practised in the forest led to feelings of content. Likewise, Deh also expressed relief to be away from the noisy (*bising*) life in Kuala Gandah. She referred to all the cars coming by, which I believe can be validly interpreted as a metaphor to the outside encroachment in general.

Cultural resilience and acts of resistance?

Howell argues that maintaining a societal identity has been important for the way the Chewong handle the rapid increase in interaction with the outside world. She found that abandoning localities and practices of their ancestors by moving to Kuala Gandah had important repercussions (Howell 2001). Such practices and localities are closely linked to the Chewong cosmology and egalitarian social organisation, and are accordingly central in their cultural identity. Howell's observations correspond to my own empirical data. I found that the recent social changes in Kuala Gandah have led to a decrease in the importance attributed to the traditional cosmology and to changes in social interaction. It was commented that the young in Kuala Gandah were becoming like Malays (*macam Melayu*). According to Howell, such changes are perceived by the Chewong as threatening. Hence, she continues, they do what they traditionally have done in the face of danger: they withdraw.

According to James Scott, dominant groups cannot impose their ideas on the subordinate, because the dominated are always and everywhere resisting, either covertly or overtly. Resistance "includes *any* act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims ... made on that class by superordinate classes ... or to advance its own claims ... vis-à-vis those superordinate classes" (Scott 1985:290). The "weapons of the weak" include everyday forms of resistance, such as foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, slander, sabotage and flight. Following Barrington Moore, Scott reminds us that "throughout the centuries one of the common man's most frequent and effective responses to oppression [has been] *flight* (Moore 1978, in Scott 1985:245). Scott adds that when such acts become a consistent pattern (even though uncoordinated, let alone organized) we are dealing with resistance. The processes of withdrawal among the Chewong have been observed on a large scale by Howell, and later on a smaller scale by myself. Thus, it seems plausible to argue that returning to the forest is a "consistent pattern" among the Chewong. So, can these acts be fruitfully analysed as acts of resistance?

When I asked Deh explicitly for the reason for their withdrawal, she had a simple answer: "We moved because we wanted to grow maize". The soil around Kuala Gandah is not very fertile, and unsuitable for growing maize. Deh's initial explanation might seem straightforward, but a thick description reveals underlying

reasons to her craving for maize. The family moved during the rainy season, a time when it is not easy to find money. The *petai* and honey season was over, forest products normally sold to outsiders. The rattan in the nearby areas had all been collected, and it would take over a year for the new sprouts to grow long enough to sell. The family had been collecting large amounts of the fruit *keranji*, but the middleman told them that he was not interested in buying it this year. As a result of these circumstances, Deh and Mar did not have enough money to buy rice. In order to supplement their diet which now mainly consisted of tapioca, Deh decided to make a new field inside the forest. Living in the forest would also make it easier for Mar to go hunting. Therefore, the main reason for their choice seems to be of economic and nutritional origin. Scott himself admits that “the goal, after all, of the great bulk of peasant resistance is not directly to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive – today, this week, this season – within it” (ibid:301). Too me, this sounds more like a survival strategy than “weapons of the weak”, and calls into question the analytical utility of the resistance concept.

I agree with Micheal F. Brown (1996), who points to how indiscriminate use of the resistance concept might decrease our sensitivity to injustice. Sherry Ortner likewise warns against an overemphasis on studies on resistance, and shows how they tend toward “ethnographic thinness”. “[R]esistors are doing more than simply opposing domination, more than simply producing a virtually mechanical *re*-action ... they have their *own* politics...” (Ortner 1995:176-177). As in the case with Deh and Mar, a one-dimensional analytical focus on resistance would undermine how the difficult situation leading to the move was due to poverty. In addition, “ethnographic thinness” could easily overlook the important cosmological connections the Chewong



Nurul in front of Deh and Mar's house in Kuala Gandah.



Deh is preparing a new field by the slash-and-burn method next to their new settlement Kintung inside the forest.

have to the forest, which contributes to the explanation of the choice Deh and Mar took when faced with difficulties. One could imagine other solutions to their problem, for example migration to the city in search for paid work. However, this did not occur to them. The return to the forest seems ultimately connected to their cultural identity based on forest localities and practices of their ancestors.

Analytical remarks

In order to achieve a thick description of Deh and Mar's choice, a number of factors need to be taken into account. First and foremost, the emic (and I would argue; the most important) explanation for the move was poverty and a lack of food. The key motive was to grow maize, i.e. to supplement their diet through cultivation and hunting. Secondly, the *specific* solution to these problems can be explained in cultural terms of relations to traditions and forest localities. Other alternatives such as migration were discarded; Deh and Mar opted for a choice in line with traditional Chewong values. In this way, they contribute to a continuity of indigenous traditions in face of a society in rapid change. Lastly, the act can be seen to bring about consequences resembling resistance. By moving, Deh and Mar are resisting dominance by acting against the aspirations of the authorities, whose attempts of controlling the Chewong involve a request for sedentary lives in Kuala Gandah within the reach of various development efforts. However, I do not find the aspect of resistance to be the crucial explanation of the act. I believe it is equally important to pay heed to the actors own interpretations, to the pragmatic origin of Deh and Mar's choice, and to the cultural background which influences their actions. Thus, to obtain a thorough understanding of the situation a multi-dimensional analysis is ideal. In the rest of my thesis I will endeavour for such an analysis, but I realize that my data material has limitations as regards depth and comprehensiveness. A fieldwork of six months is by far not enough to fully comprehend the complexities in the Chewong society, and as a result most of my arguments are tentative. Nevertheless, I have aspired towards a thick description paying attention to various elements, and it follows that the changes in Kuala Gandah will not be described in black and white. Positive and negative repercussions intertwine, and in the end of the day only the Chewong can evaluate the situation and decide for future actions. However, their

current and future decisions are constrained by outside forces. Chapter 2 will give an overview of the historical relations between the Orang Asli and the country's majority groups, elucidating the process leading up to the present situation of domination and subordination. Chapter 3-6 will each provide a description of an area of change in Kuala Gandah. While paying attention to how these changes are shaped by the overall political situation, I will also analyze how they in turn affect the indigenous Chewong traditions.

Methodology

Anthropologists and sociologists either describe the hidden resources at the disposal of the people or analyse the deprivation under which they labour. They rarely attempt to do both. (Olivier de Sardan 2005:123)

I have aimed to avoid the pitfall identified by Olivier de Sardan, but I must admit that my interests and sense of justice have pushed me towards a focus on the constraints faced by the Chewong. It is therefore appropriate here to point to the “hidden” resources of the people I have encountered. As my project deals with changes in the Chewong society, it is easy to overlook the strong degree of cultural resilience embedded in the Chewong culture. This resilience can be recognized in the pattern of withdrawal described above. In spite of a relatively firm pressure to settle down in Kuala Gandah, a large portion of the Chewong still live deep inside the Krau Wildlife Reserve. I believe this possibility for continued autonomy is one of the reasons as to why the Chewong have managed fairly well compared to many other indigenous groups facing the challenges of the nation-state's intrusion on their areas. The Chewong have so far avoided a situation of anomie, alienation, and alcoholism commonly seen among indigenous groups in other parts of the world – and also in some other Orang Asli settlements.

Ethical reflections

I want to draw attention to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's plea to *decolonize methodologies* when it comes to research on indigenous peoples. Smith (2004) points to how research on indigenous peoples has been coloured by imperialism and colonialism.

The earliest researchers were often not formally trained, but hobbyist researchers and adventurers. In the traveller's tales "the others" were constructed around the traveller's own cultural views, and images were brought back to Europe which presented "the others" as the "cannibal" chief, the "red" Indian, the "witch" doctor, etc. Smith argues that scholarly and popular work has continued these representations and ideological constructions of "the others" in ways which perpetuate the colonizer's power over the colonized (ibid). Correspondingly, Bishop and Glynn (1999) show how most studies of Maori people's lives and experiences has been of more benefit to the researchers than to those who have been the objects of study. In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2004), Smith proposes different approaches to ensure that research with indigenous peoples can be more respectful, ethical, sympathetic and useful. Importantly, she writes, "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (ibid:5). In line with such an argument, Nicholas makes the following case:

But, some may say, should not a scientist be neutral and objective? Well, even if it were possible to be a neutral and objective scientist – for one loses objectivity as soon as one chooses to do one area of study over that of another – I have to agree with Wallerstein (2004: 15) in that academics need to move away from an image of the neutral scientist to that of the intelligently concerned scientist. (Nicholas 2005c)

For an intelligently concerned scientist, the mere pursuit of knowledge is not an end in itself, but should be followed by action. Likewise, Smith's call for "an agenda for indigenous research" is an agenda for action. "The agenda connects local, regional and global efforts which are moving towards the ideal of a self-determining indigenous world" (Smith 2004:115). Being a young, inexperienced, and relatively rich non-indigenous western researcher, I have repeatedly felt the need to justify my "intrusion" into the Chewong community. However, I am afraid my project will not bring much action in terms of a move towards the ideal of self-determination at this stage. My aims are therefore humble. I hope to portray my observations as honest, sincere and as straightforward as possible. I want to draw attention to the everyday struggles of the Chewong – and to the ways they get by. I feel obliged to describe the injustice I witnessed, and to speak truth to the power relations which leaves the Orang Asli subordinated and exploited. It is in this way I have attempted to be an

intelligently concerned scientist. I have become aware of the political aspects of doing research, and I have taken sides, leaving the “ideal” of objectivity behind. In fact, I believe six months in an Orang Asli village would strip the most rigid researcher off her neutrality – at least if she pays attention to the people’s concerns.

However, this choice implies another ethical aspect. When I was applying for a research permit, which was kindly granted by the Economic Planning Unit in Malaysia, I was presented with a list of “sensitive issues” which I was asked not to deal with. To give an example, paragraph 1.1 says “Questioning the implementation of certain government policies pertaining to economic development, education and social matters”. (The list of sensitive issues is attached as appendix 1). Because of my aim to portray the situation as honest as possible, I have touched slightly upon some of these issues in the course of the thesis. Nevertheless, it is crucial to stress that what I am writing here is all of my responsibility – and mine alone. This is especially important to keep this in mind as I have chosen to use real names of people and places, although I have avoided naming the person(s) in certain instances.

Data gathering

The main data collection was done in the village of Kuala Gandah, with additional short trips to some settlements inside the forest. In Kuala Gandah, I resided in Deh and Mar’s house, as mentioned above. I did not pay for the accommodation, but bought food and other necessities to the whole extended family. In addition, I paid electricity bills and other costs on which my presence made an impact. Approximately once a week I brought one of the women in the family on my rented motorbike to the market in Lanchang, where I let them buy food and occasionally clothes and other stuff. My time in Kuala Gandah was spent hanging around and visiting other houses, drinking tea and chatting with the villagers. Deh and Mar’s eldest unmarried daughter Noni was preparing most of the meals which I consumed together with the rest of the family. While sometimes helping out with the meals, I must admit that I was not of much practical help in the household, as most of the work was unfamiliar to me. My attempts to prepare rattan for baskets, for example, were met with laughter. As noted by Briggs (1970), it is difficult to participate on equal terms with the community members in a field situation, and I remained an outsider in spite of Deh and Mar

calling me their adopted daughter. Nevertheless, the long-term stay in Kuala Gandah enabled observations of the villagers in a number of situations over time. The data collected are mainly results of observations and informal conversations. I decided not to do interviews as I doubted its futility; the information I was looking for was not easily transformed into simple questions and answers. Furthermore, the interview setting would have created an artificial atmosphere which I believe would strongly influence the statements. Partly for the same reasons I decided not to bring an interpreter. It took me a long time to get to know my informants and to gain their trust. Their shy character discouraged me from bringing in a new person, as I felt my own presence to be intruding enough.

During the fieldwork I was faced by a number of challenges which has limited my research findings. Before I arrived in Kuala Gandah, I followed a short Malay course, but I was far from confident in the language. However, as no one spoke English among the Chewong, I soon learned to get by with my Malay, although I suspect that the Chewong sometimes simplified their explanations and statements in order to make me understand. Moreover, the Chewong spoke their indigenous Chewong language amongst themselves, and even though I learned some words and phrases, I was not able to follow their conversations. This was a clear research disadvantage, as I probably missed much interesting information exchanged in the Chewong language. Another difficulty was to access the men's sphere. There were no structural obstacles hindering me from socializing with the men, but in my person as a woman I felt more comfortable around the women and children. The Chewong shyness soon infected me too, and I felt increasingly timid towards the less familiar men as time passed by, and therefore my data has a female bias.

The field data has been supplemented by written sources, both on Orang Asli groups and indigenous groups elsewhere. Naturally, I have relied heavily on Signe Howell's many publications on the Chewong. Checking her data with my informants, I am confident in the correctness and high quality of her work. I have also made extensive use of Colin Nicholas' writings for the general political and historical setting. Nicholas holds a PhD from the University of Malaya on Orang Asli politics, development and identity, and has been working with the Orang Asli since 1983. He is also the coordinator of the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns, a local NGO advocating Orang Asli rights. I was allowed to join Nicholas on several fieldtrips to different Orang Asli villages around the Malaysian peninsula. In the course of my stay

I visited settlements of nine different Orang Asli subgroups⁷, an experience which sensitised my understanding of the common challenges facing the various Orang Asli groups. These insights were further developed when I attended the “International Conference on the Indigenous People” in Kuala Lumpur in July 2005, where I met both academics and government officials working within the field. As the Conference was organized by the JHEOA, I got to see the government’s official view and their way of presenting the issues at stake. Their presented evaluation gave the impression of a success story – an interpretation with which I cannot fully agree.

⁷ As mentioned above, there are 18 subgroups under the generic label Orang Asli.



Children playing football in Kuala Gandah



Kintung. Mar and his sons Hamid and Raman are on their way into the forest.

2 Historical and Political Backdrop

Only by locating the Orang Asli in their full historical and socio-economic context can their present response to political and economic changes to their lifestyles be understood. For today, as it was in the past, the Orang Asli are locked in a dynamic struggle with the wider society – and with themselves – over the control of resources they declare as their own, over attempts at denying and redefining their cultural identity, and over concerns of political access and economic distribution. (Nicholas 2000:59)

Pre-colonial relations

The early ancestors of the Orang Asli probably migrated from the north (Burma, Yunnan, Cambodia) through Thailand to the Malay Peninsula as early as ten thousand years ago. They lived in small mobile groups practicing hunting, gathering and swidden cultivation. Before the arrival of the Malays, some Orang Asli were engaged in exchange relations with traders from India, China and the Mon civilizations. The Orang Asli supplied forest products in exchange for salt, cloth and iron tools. However, the rise of the Malay sultanates in the Peninsula, especially during the last 200 years or so, pushed the original inhabitants further into the hills and forests. With a perception of the aboriginal peoples as wild, akin to animals, the Malays practiced slavery until the early part of the nineteenth century (Howell 1995, Nicholas 2000). Benjamin (2002) suggests that the Malay perception of the aboriginals as “exotic, wild playthings” legitimized the slave raiding, and that the slave owners probably did not see themselves as cruel. As Endicott (1983:222) writes, “It seems that the Orang Asli were viewed as a natural resource, an especially valuable forest product that could be collected for domestic use or converted into cash”. Usually it was the women and children who were captured, while the men, and sometimes old women without market value, were killed at the spot. Slave raiding installed terror in the Orang Asli, and the most common response was flight, withdrawal and minimizing of contact. According to Endicott,

“the memory of slave raiding has been preserved by most Orang Asli groups, and this exerts an important influence upon their actions today... [The] stories shape and justify a world view in which outsiders, especially Malays, are pictured as dangerous and untrustworthy”. (Endicott 1983:237)

He goes on to argue that teaching the children to fear outsiders has a practical purpose. As the Orang Asli normally do not like to punish their children, they use fear and the threat of punishment by outside agents as a sanction against misbehavior. Howell explains the Chewong response to encountered violence in the past by referring to the cultural value of non-violence in the Chewong society. While most emotions are restrained by various rules, *fear* and *shyness* are positively encouraged. She relates the following story to her enquires regarding slave-raiding in the past:

When asked why they had not shot at the Malays with their poisoned darts or built traps around their homes, the Chewong always replied that it had not occurred to them. “We were very frightened and ran away and hid”, they always said ... They live in constant fear of the outside world, and stories about alleged atrocities committed against Orang Asli by Malays are always circulating. (Howell 1989a:35-36)

Although flight was the most common response in early encounters with the Malays, Benjamin (2002) points to the fact that some groups established exchange relations with the Malay Sultans. Similarly, Nicholas (2000) writes that some Orang Asli have had economic dealings with the neighboring Malay communities for the past few hundred years, emphasizing that the Orang Asli did not live in complete isolation in the past. However, it was not until late colonial times and “the Emergency” (see below) that the impact of outsiders on the Orang Asli societies really increased.

Colonialism and the Emergency

The first Europeans, namely the Portuguese and the Dutch, arrived in Malacca during the 16th century. The British arrived in the late 18th century, but it was not until the late 19th century they started to play a more direct part in the affairs of the peninsula. The British attitude towards the Orang Asli has been described as paternalistic. The Orang Asli were perceived as children in need of protection, unable to take care of themselves. British rule led to some positive administrative changes, such as the abolishment of slavery and debt-bondage in all states by about 1915 (Endicott 1983), but at the same time they enacted laws to control land and natural resources. However, the British presence in the peninsula did not affect the Orang Asli much until the Japanese occupation (1942-1945). During the occupation, Chinese communist guerrillas sought help and refuge from the Orang Asli to fight against the

Japanese. After this war, the communist staged an insurgency against the British that was to last for 12 years. This period (1948-1960) is called the Emergency. It was during the Emergency that the British opened their eyes to the Orang Asli, as they became an issue of national security when the communists again turned to them for help and support. Endicott argues that the Orang Asli were inclined to support the Chinese rebels, as memories of slave raiding and continued fear of the Malays made it difficult for the government to gain their cooperation and support (Endicott 1983). When the government realised that the Orang Asli were providing the insurgents with food, labour and intelligence, a strategy to win the Orang Asli over to the side of the government began. (Carey 1976, Dentan et al. 1995, Nicholas 2000)

Initial efforts to control the Orang Asli included resettlement camps. Large numbers of Orang Asli were moved from their traditional forest habitats to hastily established camps lacking even the most basic facilities. The transfer process has been characterized as uncoordinated, chaotic, and misguided, and said to cause misery, disease, and death to many of the Orang Asli. Realising the failure of this policy the British changed their tactics. In order to win the Orang Asli's support, a Department of Aborigines (a forerunner of today's JHEOA) was established in 1954, and "jungle forts" were set up to provide the Orang Asli with health facilities, education and basic consumer goods. The Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance, later to be referred to as the Aboriginal Peoples Act, was enacted in 1954, and indicated the government's recognition of their responsibility to the Orang Asli. As a result of these efforts the Orang Asli's support for the insurgents waned, and in 1960 the government was finally able to declare an end to the Emergency. (Nicholas 2000)

Merdeka and Ethnic Stratification

Colonial times had seen an expansion in demand for tin and rubber, and mining activities and plantation work attracted vast numbers of Chinese and Indian immigrants to the peninsula. As the Chinese worked with tin mining and the Indians on plantations, the new groups were integrated into different sectors of the colonial economy and social milieu, thus creating a link between ethnicity and position. The native Malays did not get incorporated in the colonial mode of production, and soon began to lag behind economically (Hilley 2001). Therefore, when the Federation of

Malaya became independent in 1957 (*Merdeka*), “special privileges” were attributed to the Malays as part of the “Bargain” between the Malays, Chinese, and Indians.

Special Privileges, Ethnic Tensions and the NEP

In 1963, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaya to create the Federation of Malaysia. The inclusion of a large number of indigenous peoples from Sabah and Sarawak made a revision of ethnic categories necessary, and the Malays’ special privileges were therefore extended to the natives of Sabah and Sarawak in the Federal constitution. The Orang Asli were never included in this category (Dentan et al. 1997). The term *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil), on the contrary, is a political term introduced after the ethnic violence in 1969 (see below) which refers to the Orang Asli, the Malays, and the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak (Andaya and Andaya 2001). Dentan et al. (1997) argue that the inclusion of the Orang Asli in the bumiputera category is only obscuring the fact that they are not granted special privileges on par with the Malays and the natives of Sabah and Sarawak as enshrined in the Federal Constitution. The assumption is supported by Andaya and Andaya who states that “Malay Bumiputera are clearly favoured over Orang Asli Bumiputera ...” (2001:342).

Since Merdeka, the Chinese communities felt their traditions threatened by the increasingly dominant Malay political class. For the Malays, the rise of a Chinese opposition represented a dangerous challenge to their constitutional rights. In May 1969 these tensions resulted in violent ethnic clashes. The politically dominant Malays demanded a greater share of the country’s wealth, and as a result new measures were taken to improve the economic position of the bumiputeras vis-à-vis the Chinese immigrants. A series of elaborate development plans, guided by the New Economic Policy (NEP), were then introduced. The NEP had two main objectives; 1) the eradication of poverty, and 2) the removal of association of ethnicity with economic function. Underlying these objectives were positive discrimination policies designed to achieve a 30% target of bumiputera commercial ownership by 1990, accompanied by preferential treatment for Malays in education, jobs and other key areas (Hilley 2001). Since the introduction of the NEP, Malaysia has had an impressive economic growth. In 2004, the national poverty level has dropped

remarkably to 6.5 per cent. However, more than three-quarters (an estimated 76.5 per cent (Nicholas & Baer 2004) of the Orang Asli still live below the poverty line. Other social indicators such as health, education, access to basic facilities, etc. all show that the Orang Asli rate far behind the Malaysian mainstream (Nicholas 2000 & 2005a). As will become clear, the government's development policies are largely irreconcilable with the wellbeing of the Orang Asli.

Vision 2020

The government's view of development corresponds largely to the modernisation-theories popular in the years after World War II. The emphasis of these theories revolves around ways to ensure that "modern" culture replace "traditional" culture, so that traditional obstacles to development can be reduced (Dentan et al. 1997, Nicholas 2000). Though heavily criticized in the 1970s and 1980s, the theories are still influencing policies in many development agencies and governments, including Malaysia's. During the former Prime Minister Mahathir's time in office (from 1981-2003), the Malaysian government adopted the language of neo-liberalism to promote privatization, initiate state reforms and assuage foreign capital. In 1991 Mahathir introduced the concept of *Vision 2020*, with the principal goal of making Malaysia a fully industrialized country by the year 2020 (Hilley 2001). However, the chase for economic development has, according to Dentan et al. (1997:90), "overridden all other considerations". Much of the growth has so far derived from primary industries such as logging, mining, and plantation agriculture (mainly rubber and oil palm). The victim of this extensive exploitation of natural resources is not only the tropical rain forest, but also the people using this forest as a source of subsistence and cultural identity, namely the Orang Asli. Other development projects have also come at the expense of the wellbeing of the Orang Asli, such as building of dams, a new east-west highway, a new university, a new airport, and various tourist facilities. Many of these projects have led to the resettlement of Orang Asli. Seldom are they paid proper compensation, and the new "villages" that are provided often lack basic facilities such as clean water, proper houses and fertile land.

As the Orang Asli are lacking far behind the rest of the Malaysian population in terms of economic development and civil rights, one should think that “their own” department would be of their assistance. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli

The Department of Aborigines was established in 1954⁸ under the Aboriginal People’s Ordinance. The Department was later renamed Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA), or the Department of Orang Asli Affairs. The JHEOA is the only government department that caters to a particular ethnic group. As it was created during the Emergency, the security motives of the Act upon which it was established are evident. The act accords the Director-General of the JHEOA the final say in all matters concerning the administration of the Orang Asli. It also establishes that the State authority is the owner of Orang Asli land. Initially, the department was in control of all matters regarding the Orang Asli, only later has some of the responsibilities been wholly or partly transferred to other departments, such as education and parts of the health delivery system (Nicholas 2000, Nicholas et al. 2005)

Nevertheless, the JHEOA still exercise full power over the administration of the Orang Asli. Based on the Aboriginal Peoples Act, the department can even prohibit any non-Orang Asli from entering an Orang Asli area. This is why, when I applied to the Economic Planning Unit for a permit to conduct research among the Chewong, the JHEOA had to approve of the project. While waiting for the permit, I went for a short one-week stay in Kuala Gandah to investigate the possibilities of doing research there. After five days, two officials from the local JHEOA office came to see me. They declared that I could not stay in the village until I had a valid research permit and permission from the JHEOA. According to my newly acquired Chewong friends, the officials probably feared that I was a Christian missionary. This prompted me to think that they perhaps had a religious responsibility as well. Officially, the department’s aim is,

⁸ The Department was nascent in 1950, when Peter D.R. Williams-Hunt was appointed the first Federal Advisor on Aborigines. However, his position was purely advisory with no power. It was not until 1954 the Department expanded and got new responsibilities from the government (Dentan et al. 1997).

...to ensure that Orang Asli community achieves a level of socio-economic well-being at par with those of other communities in this country, and imbued with ethical values while at the same time maintaining their identity. (JHEOA official webpage)

In practice, this seems not to be the case. Nicholas argues that “the official policy of integration for the Orang Asli, with its assimilationist tendency, effectively advances a process of de-culturalisation among the Orang Asli” (2000:111). Other critics have pointed out that the existence of the JHEOA is contradictory to its goal of integrating the Orang Asli into the wider society, as a separate department to look into their affairs only enhances their minority status (Wazir 1986, in Nicholas 2000). Thus, the JHEOA’s *raison d’être* seems to be control of the Orang Asli and their resources. The fact that Malays hold superior positions in the department – in spite of qualified and able Orang Asli applicants – proves the point (Nicholas 2000).

Policies for Assimilation

The objective role of the JHEOA is to integrate, and if possible, to assimilate the Orang Asli with the national society; but if there is assimilation, then it is considered a bonus. (Former Director-General Jimin Idris, cited in Nicholas 2000:127)

Why should the JHEOA specifically, and the government generally, wish to assimilate the Orang Asli? Nicholas argues convincingly that this is due to a contest for resources. Throughout the book *The Orang Asli and the Contest for Resources* (2000), he gives examples of policies and interventions which work to reduce the local autonomy and cultural identity of the Orang Asli. Areas with natural resources are of outmost importance in the government’s race towards development and economic growth. However, most of these areas have been occupied by the Orang Asli and their ancestors for generations. The Orang Asli cosmology and cultural identity is strongly linked to their local environment, thus, for the Orang Asli to willingly give up their traditional territories, their attachment to land must first be eroded. “With assimilation, it is hoped that their traditional cultural values and localized identity are replaced by new ones, including a reduced attachment to a particular ecological niche” (Nicholas 2000:111). Through various means it is attempted to assimilate the Orang Asli into the Malay section of the Malaysian

society, but the main tool is Islamization. After conversion to Islam, the Orang Asli have all the characteristics necessary for a Malay identity. Converting to Islam is therefore referred to as *masuk Melayu* (become Malay) by the Orang Asli. But what would happen if all the Orang Asli *masuk Melayu*? An Orang Asli cunningly stated; “When all the Orang Asli have become Malays, then the Malays will become Orang Asli” (Semai man cited in Endicott & Dentan 2004:30). Needless to say, this would legitimize the Malays’ claim to indigenouness and their privileges of special rights.

The government’s efforts to achieve Islamization include missionary programs and positive discrimination. Thus, the government, through the Religious Department, paid the Chewong families who converted to Islam a certain amount of money according to the number of family members, and also promised electricity (which, however, was never given). According to the Chewong, the “reward” for conversion varied from RM 200 to 500, money which was quickly spent on food and other necessities.

The issue of land rights

“The attachment Orang Asli have to their traditional lands cannot be over-emphasised”, Nicholas (2000:32) writes, and points to physical, cultural and spiritual relationship between the people and their environment. This holds true for the Chewong as well, who – to a large degree – depend on their surrounding environment for survival. Unfortunately, as the rest of the Orang Asli groups, the Chewong have little security when it comes to ownership of their traditional territories. Currently, the greatest title that the Orang Asli can have to their land is one of tenant-at-will. The state can re-acquire the land at any time without any need for compensation, save for what the Orang Asli have built or planted on it (Nicholas 2000, 2005a). Orang Asli land is a state matter, and even if the JHEOA should encourage gazetting, the respective state may not approve of it. In fact, gazetted areas represent only 15 per cent of the Orang Asli villages, and the size of gazetted Orang Asli reserves *declined* by 1,159.6 hectares from 1990 to 1999 (Nicholas 2005a). The situation regarding land for the Chewong follows the national trend. In Kuala Gandah (officially Sungai Enggang) 121.5 hectares was approved for gazetting in the mid 1970s, but were never gazetted. After 1997, the land became state land (Colin Nicholas, personal

communication). The Chewong settlements inside the forest are part of the Krau Wildlife Reserve. For this reason, the Chewong have retained access to parts of their traditional areas, although the forest has been logged and the areas encroached by Malays right up to the border of the Reserve. As regards the management of the Krau Wildlife Reserve, the situation is no better for the Chewong than the rest of Orang Asli communities in other protected areas, who “are not recognised by consultants and protected area managers as being owners of the territories now being proclaimed a protected area, [and] their rights, opinions and involvement in the management of these areas are not protected” (Nicholas 2005b). I got access to a report on “Local Community Involvement and Management Considerations” of the Krau Wildlife Park, as prepared by Colin Nicholas after a research project in the area. The Report suggests improvements and measures to include the local Orang Asli communities in administration and management of the Krau Wildlife Reserve; to secure their rights to continued use of land and forest products; and it proposes sustainable ways in which the Orang Asli in the Reserve can benefit from tourism. Unfortunately, none of these suggestions are included in the final Management Plan of the Reserve as prepared by the DWNP.

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The description of the historical and political circumstances regarding the Orang Asli constitutes a backdrop against which the current situation among the Chewong has to be understood. I will now go on to examine how the changes in Kuala Gandah are taking place within these settings of unequal power relations. The next four chapters will each deal with an area of change; education, economy, religion and health.

3 The introduction of formal education

This chapter will provide a short account of the national situation regarding schooling for the Orang Asli, followed by a general discussion of education as a political tool; as a mechanism of assimilation or empowerment. Thereafter I will continue with an empirical description of the educational system in Kuala Gandah. The high dropout rate among the Chewong pupils will be discussed and analyzed. I will end the chapter with a discussion of the impact of formal schooling on the indigenous knowledge systems in the Chewong society.

Until 1995, education of the Orang Asli was in the hands of the JHEOA. Because of low enrolment and high dropout rates, the department ran a program which was supposed to supplement the national educational system and compensate for the Orang Asli's isolation from government schools and their lack of familiarity with formal education. However, the dropout rates remained extremely high, and all parties now admit that the program was a failure (Endicott & Dentan 2004). While the JHEOA officials were blaming the Orang Asli and their culture, Endicott and Dentan (2004) point to a number of other causal factors. Corporal punishment scared many pupils away. All teaching was done in Malay, a language unfamiliar to the youngest Orang Asli children. The curriculum reflected the needs of urban children from other ethnic groups, and was often irrelevant and incomprehensible to the Orang Asli. Preschool teaching was carried out by Malays and some Orang Asli with a very low level of education and without training as teachers. In the Primary Schools the teachers were Malays provided by the Ministry of Education. However, as many teachers resented being sent to Orang Asli schools, only the weakest of them were assigned there. Some of these inferior teachers took out their resentment and frustration on their students (ibid).

Unfortunately, incorporation in public schools and transferring responsibility of Orang Asli education to the Ministry of Education in 1995 did not lead to significant changes. Even though the teachers may be of higher level, they do not know much of the Orang Asli cultures or languages. The curriculum is the same, catering to urban settings and the needs of other ethnic groups. Despite a gradual increase in enrolment, the Orang Asli dropout rate is still very high. Based on JHEOA

statistics, it is estimated that 94,4 per cent of the Orang Asli schoolchildren who registered in Primary One never reached the end of secondary schooling 11 years later (Nicholas 2000:24). The gap in performance between the Orang Asli and other Malaysian pupils is substantial. The literacy rate for Orang Asli in 1991 was 43 per cent, while the national rate was 86 per cent. However, because of the high dropout rate not more than 30 per cent of the Orang Asli were *functionally* literate (Nicholas & Baer 2004).

Education as a political tool

The introduction of formal education to indigenous groups can be seen as a double-edged sword. Johnson Ole Kaunga (2005) uses this term when describing the formal education system in Kenya. For the pastoralists, one of the poorest and most disadvantaged sectors of the Kenyan society, the current education system is seen to weaken their traditional institutions of governance, traditional livelihoods and indigenous knowledge. These problems arise out of the authorities' perception of the pastoralists' way of life and culture as something which inhibits the benefits of modern development. Formal education is seen as the means to achieve integration and thus development for this group of people. On the other hand, education has been important in enabling some pastoralists to access positions of leadership and eventually articulate their concerns and advocate their rights (Johnson Ole Kaunga 2005). The dilemmas highlighted by Johnson Ole Kaunga are well-known in many indigenous communities around the world, and the challenges facing the Orang Asli and the Kenyan pastoralists are clearly related. The Malaysian authorities see a need for modernization of the Orang Asli cultures. When the JHEOA education program fell short, the officials blamed the Orang Asli parents and their traditions, and failed to see the problems inherent in the educational system (Endicott & Dentan 2004). Hence, further efforts tend to perpetuate the object of assimilation through mainstream education, which in many cases breaks down the cultural identities of the Orang Asli. Nicholas describes it as a case of gaining control over the Orang Asli by "destroying their autonomy and subject them and their resources to the state" (Nicholas 2000:127). This is attempted through gradually decreasing the cultural identity of the Orang Asli groups. For this objective, education is a useful tool as it

targets children who are normally more malleable and open to change. In line with Nicholas, Dentan stresses how the Malaysian educational system has an objective of assimilation. “The school shows the children how to become inferior Malays. The language of instruction is Malay. Almost all the history books begin with the Malacca Sultanate, when Malay rule began in Malaya, with no mention of Orang Asli ...” (Dentan 2000:221). Glynn and Bishop (1999) use the term *epistemological racism* to account for such domination within the school system. Indigenous Orang Asli knowledge traditions are devalued and totally absent in the curriculum. Such epistemological racism is obviously an aspect of what Lukes calls recognitional domination;

[T]he dominant group or nation, in control of the means of interpretation and communication, project their own experience and culture as the norm, rendering invisible the perspective of those they dominate, while simultaneously stereotyping them and marking them out as “other”. (Lukes 2005:120)

The invisibility of the Orang Asli and their indigenous knowledge in the school system reflects the idea of cultural superiority held by the Malays. The Orang Asli are perceived as backward “others” against which the Malays can assert their own modernity. This leads to a unified educational system, which in many ways contradicts the needs of the Orang Asli. The Ministry of Education articulates the National Education Philosophy as follows:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going efforts [sic] towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holostic [sic] and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intelectually [sic], spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonic, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God ... (Ministry of Education’s official webpage)

One of the points in Ministry’s Client’s Charter further elaborates the aim of

Giving all children regardless of their backgrounds, religious convictions or descent an equal oppurtunity [sic] to receive the best education. (Ministry of Education’s official webpage)

However, equal opportunities are not achieved by merely disregarding the pupils’ backgrounds, religious convictions or descent. In order to provide the best education for all, culture needs to be taken into account, as a lack of understanding of the school

system, its structure and language, and a gap between the children's reality and the world of books make it difficult for many indigenous children to master the demands at school. With experience from Guatemala, Solstad (2001) claims that children have two options when they experience their language and culture devalued in the school system. They might either disregard what they learn at school and soon drop out, or they might adopt the school's values and accordingly lose respect of their own community's traditions. The better alternative, Solstad among a number of other scholars argue, is a culturally-relevant school (Solstad 2001). If duly adjusted, schooling can then be used as a political tool to empower the marginalized. Such attempts have been made with success in the state of Sabah in East Malaysia as discussed below.

The alternative of empowerment

Anne Lasimbang, herself an indigenous Kadazandusun of Sabah, is the coordinator of the Community Education Programme of PACOS, a local non-governmental organization. Lasimbang describes how rural areas, where indigenous communities mostly are based, are often lacking in education facilities, infrastructure and qualified teachers. Therefore indigenous children are already disadvantaged when they enter school (Lasimbang 2005).

PACOS started their preschool program in Sabah in 1993. One of the main objectives was to promote positive indigenous values and traditions that strengthen the communities across generations. The national curriculum was extended with materials that reflected local language, culture and environment. The cooperation with parents and the local communities was extensive and led to positive attitudes among the parents towards school. When the parents understood the projects and were a part of it themselves they were better able to support the children when needed. The results have been positive as regards the children's attendance and performance in school. In addition, the project emphasized local capacity building, and as a result local (especially women) leaders have emerged (ibid). PACOS' project is an example

of the possibilities that lie in a cultural relevant education and its potential for empowerment.⁹

The Chewong and Schooling

At the entrance of Kuala Gandah there is a preschool established by the JHEOA. The preschool is meant as a one-year preparation before the children start Primary School. The pupils are Chewong from Kuala Gandah and neighboring Malay children, and the two teachers are Malays. The Primary School is situated in Bolok, almost ten kilometers from Kuala Gandah. The transportation is done by an old school bus. Unfortunately, the educational situation in Kuala Gandah is a far cry from what has been achieved in Sabah through the PACOS project described above. Leaving out the children in the deep forest who never enroll, the Chewong dropout rate is alarmingly high. Only four pupils from Kuala Gandah have finished the six years of compulsory¹⁰ primary education. One boy started Secondary School, but dropped out after one week. He told me it was too costly and that he felt lonely as the only Orang Asli there. Siti-Katijah is the only one attending secondary school. It was the Muslim teacher in Kuala Gandah who arranged for her to be sent to an Islamic religious school in Kuantan, the state capital about 120 km away. When I came back in December she had finished school and married a fellow Orang Asli student, and was now residing in his village.¹¹ Of the 12 Chewong children registered in the village preschool in 2005, only four attended. At the same time, I estimated the dropout rate for the Chewong at the Primary School in Bolok to be around 60 per cent. However, a considerable number of those who still are formally enrolled only occasionally turn up at school. An example from the school's record can illuminate this point. The table below shows percentage of days *absent* for the four Chewong pupils in class 5 in January and June 2005.

⁹ The Pacos project is replicated in SPNS Bidor and in Sarawak under the Pacos Early Education Network.

¹⁰ Compulsory education was implemented at the beginning of the school year of 2003 (Ministry of Education)

¹¹ Siti-Katijah used to be called Macang, but changed her name to a more appropriate Muslim name before she started school to Kuantan.

Table 1:
Student absentee rate, 2005

Month:	Pupil no 1	Pupil no 2	Pupil no 3	Pupil no 4
January	94,7 %	10 %	94,7 %	0 %
June	91,6 %	100 %	83,3 %	33,3 %

While pupil 1 and 3 turned up only a few days each month, pupil 2 and 4 attended school fairly regularly in January. However, number 2 seemed to have dropped out completely by June. She told me it was due to economic problems. The pattern in this table is classic among the Chewong in Kuala Gandah. Hence, it is clear that despite continued enrollment, the schooling is unsatisfactory with such high absentee rates. Some of the factors that can explain the low attendance and the eventual dropout by the Chewong children relate to economy, transportation, motivation, and values.

Economical concerns

There are no school fees at public schools in Malaysia, but several additional costs related to schooling make it hard to get by for the Chewong parents. The JHEOA is supposed to provide school uniforms at the beginning of every school year, but the uniforms often arrive too late, after the term has started. I was made aware of this problem by Orang Asli groups in other areas as well, who all faced significant economic challenges at the start of every school year. For the Chewong, the uniforms were given without shoes in 2005. The parents also need to buy schoolbags and bleaching agent to keep the white shoes and shirts clean. It might sound like a small problem, but I have witnessed Chewong children stay at home because they did not have detergent to clean their shirts properly. The children told me they would be scolded if they went to school with dirty clothes. At the Primary School there was a check every Monday when filthy clothes or dirty fingernails were punished – the teacher would hit them with a rattan stick and they had to pay a small fee of 10 sen, according to the children. I have not checked this information with the teachers, but the continued truancy every Monday by the Chewong children may prove the point.

The pupils in Bolok are given a free morning meal when they arrive at school at 7.30 am. However, until the bus takes them back around 2-3 pm that is the only food provided. The school has a cafeteria, but too often the Chewong cannot afford the food which is sold there. Frequently, the children stayed at home when there was no money to send with them to school, in other cases they would go through the day with only breakfast. Naturally, they got very hungry going for so many hours without nutrition, and the lack of food made them un-concentrated and weak. When I enquired about truancy it was a common answer that there was no money (*tak ada duit*).

Transportation

A school bus brings the Chewong and some other children residing along the way to the Primary School in Bolok. It is the JHEOA who pays the bus driver on a contract basis. While this initiative sounds blameless in principle, it involves some practical problems. Firstly, the bus is very old and breaks down frequently. Each time this happens it takes several days to have it repaired, and the children are not provided with alternative transportation on such days. Secondly, the bus schedules are unreliable. I was told that, in the past, it had happened more than once that the bus did not arrive to pick up the children after school. The children then had to walk the ten kilometers back home by foot. The school day finishes at 1 pm, except Wednesdays when they finish at noon. Yet, without exception they have to wait for the bus until 2-3 pm every day, because the bus picks up children from the Secondary School first, where the schooldays are longer. In the meantime, the Chewong children have to wait along the roadside in the blistering heat of the midday sun. Several children told me they did not want to go to school because they were fed up with waiting for the bus. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that they cannot afford to buy food while waiting. Some Malay pupils were fetched by their fathers on motorbikes, but this was seldom an alternative for the Chewong. The bikes were often in use for other activities, and going to Bolok twice a day over a period of time would entail high fuel-costs. Nevertheless, it could have been done at least once in a while, but it did not seem to be a priority for the men to contribute in this way to the children's schooling.

When I left Kuala Gandah in July 2005, the bus had once again broken down. As this happened quite often I did not give it much thought, normally it would be

repaired within a week's time. However, when I came back to the village for a follow-up fieldwork in late November the same year, I was surprised to hear that the bus was still not running. *None of the Chewong children had been to school for four months!* Some of the more eager pupils expressed their frustration. Tiara told me she felt bored and missed her friends at school. I had expected Tiara to be the fifth Chewong to finish Primary School education. She had only one year left, and showed keen interest and competence. But, as she explained to me, it would be difficult to go back to her old class now, as she would lag behind her classmates. Furthermore, there were no signs for the bus to be repaired in the near future. Noni, Tiara's elder sister, commented that the bus was probably dead beyond healing (*mati, tak boleh elok*). Noni had finished Primary School over a year ago. She wanted to continue to Secondary School, but her family could not afford it. However, as Noni was an enthusiastic Christian convert, the Christian missionaries offered to pay the costs for her schooling. Another young boy was to come along. The two youngsters were excited, and looked forward to new opportunities. It was decided that they should begin the next school year starting in January 2006. However, Noni's anticipations faded as December came towards an end. The Secondary School was far away in Bukit Damar, and she saw no solution to the transportation problem. How to go to school without transport? she asked rhetorically. The option of accommodation in the school's hostel was discarded after some of the village women stated that sending the girl to a hostel was like selling her. The women's opinion represents a common reluctance among the Chewong to send away children for schooling or other activities. However, there are exceptions, as in the case of Siti-Katijah. Notably, Siti-Katijah's father works at the Elephant Sanctuary and her elder brother has migrated in order to work at a plywood factory near Jerantut – facts indicating a slightly special family in the Chewong context.

Motivation and a lack of role models

Most of the Chewong do not see the usefulness of formal education. One mother remarked with discouragement that there was no use in sending the children to school, as no Chewong would ever get a proper job anyway. This attitude might partly be due to an absence of role models. Currently, only three men in Kuala Gandah have

permanent paid work, and their jobs did not require formal education.¹² No one from the village has ever benefited in material terms from schooling. The few who finished six years of Primary School go about their village life as the others, except Siti-Katijah (see above) who attended the Islamic school in Kuantan.

In contrast, Miah was decisive that she would send her children to school when they grew up. Unlike many Chewong parents, she said she would force them if they did not want to go. She was hoping to see her children continue with higher education. “Maybe they can become doctors!” she said with excitement, and expressed fear that they would drop out of school like she herself had done. Miah is originally from Kampung Rekoh in Kuala Krau. She is one of four Jah Hut women in Kuala Gandah who have married Chewong men. Miah told me with pride that in her village one Jah Hut woman had become a preschool teacher, and that she had relatives attending secondary school. Manja, also Jah Hut, is from Penderas in Kuala Krau, another Orang Asli village where school attainment is much higher than in Kuala Gandah. Manja was putting far more pressure on her children to go to school than the Chewong parents did. She stated that schooling was important for the future. The Jah Hut women’s attitudes differ from the Chewong parents who normally see no future benefit in formal education. The examples support the importance of role models for motivations.

Discrepancies in value systems

There are discrepancies between the community and the school system’s values. In Kuala Gandah, the children’s upbringing is rather free. The children play and run around in the village as they please. Meals are often taken in other people’s houses. Looking after younger children is done collectively by adults and elder children, although the nearest family has the main responsibility and the young children are strongly attached to their parents. The children do have duties as they get older, such as taking care of younger siblings, helping out with cooking, and accompany their parents in foraging or hunting. Nevertheless, they enjoy a great deal of freedom, and it is not uncommon to see a child oppose an adult’s command. Difficult children are

¹² Kelawar is working for the Wildlife Department, Maris for the Elephant Sanctuary, and Maris’ son at a plywood factory near Jerantut. In addition, the Batin (village head) receives a small annual ‘bonus’ payment from the JHEOA.

laughed at, and malicious behaviour is blamed on ignorance. Shuichi Nagata (1995) has described socialisation in an Orang Asli resettlement community in Kedah¹³, and contrasts the local emphasis on peer socialization with the formal school culture. He argues that the crucial reason for the children's reluctance to attend school is a pervasive sense of insecurity and fear, which he attributes to the communities long history of hardship inflicted by outsiders. The circumstances described by Nagata correspond largely to the Chewong situation.

The transition from a relatively free upbringing with a strong degree of peer socialization in the local community, to the strict and formal rules at school is challenging. From preschool onwards the language used in teaching is Malay. The Chewong children do not master this language when they enter preschool. The schooldays are characterized by a rigid time schedule, and respect, politeness and conformity are stressed. At preschool the subjects taught are Malay, English, science and religion. According to the teacher, who herself is Muslim, the children are taught all kinds of religion, not only Islam. I cannot tell whether this is accurate or not, but what is certain is that they do not learn anything about the Chewong culture and traditions. More so, the Chewong parents are not included in the teaching in any way, in spite of the preschool being situated at the entrance of the village and the possibilities for cooperation are ample. Most of the parents do not know what is going on at school, and consequently put little pressure on the children if they want to shirk.

Children normally start preschool when they are five or six years old. One of the four Chewong children who attended regularly in 2005 was Malina. Malina was seven years old and should strictly speaking have started Primary School in Bolok. However, Malina's father did not want to let her go (*tak mau bagi*). He felt she was not ready yet. Likewise, Maya was also in her second year of preschool. Maya was afraid to start school in Bolok as she had heard her elder siblings tell stories of how the teachers beat them there. The children expressed great fear of the corporal punishment.

¹³ The settlement consists of three groups – the Kensiu, the Kintak Bogn and the Kintak Nakil.

Impacts on Indigenous Knowledge

I have argued above that education can be seen as a double-edged sword, but in reality, the dichotomy is not always as clear as in this figurative expression. Surely, formal education can have both positive and negative repercussions for an indigenous society, but sometimes the results are subtle, and their quality may depend on individual preference. However, what definitely should be avoided as far as possible is a situation like the one Dentan depicts from the Semai group.

Because children cannot go into the forests or orchards with their parents if they are going to school, the system of education does, whatever its other failures, make the children so ignorant of traditional skills that they cannot revert to the old Semai ways. In other words, their education makes them unskilled in two societies. (Dentan 2000:221)

Dentan's description is pessimistic, but presents a reminder of the importance of adjusting the school system so that it will ultimately benefit the Orang Asli, not harm them. The risk of ending up as "unskilled in two societies" is of course mediated by a number of factors, some of which will be dealt with in the following chapters. Nonetheless, the sporadic schooling based on a unified national curriculum has already made some impacts on the Chewong society.

Knowledge systems

The most obvious factor of change concerns knowledge and expertise. A significant number of the younger generation is now literate, and this opens up some opportunities for them. Although none have taken paid jobs based on their education, other areas have been utilized. As an example, some young girls have got special positions in the Christian ceremonies. Three girls were working on a translation of hymns into the Chewong language. The result of their work was printed, and the book was used during the ceremonies. Some literate women have participated in different research projects in the village and the area of the Krau Wildlife Reserve. Even though the knowledge of elders also has been utilized in such projects, the literate could participate at another level, like helping out with interviews and data collection. I myself benefited from their help in the spelling of names and places, for example.

The elders' contribution in some projects was to identify the name and usage of various species in the forest, the villagers told me. Whereas the elders still possess knowledge of how to utilize a number of forest products, the actual use has declined. For example, one day we were walking in the forest, Deh showed me how the soft bark of a specific tree could be used as soap. She demonstrated by rubbing the piece of bark in her hair, to the amusement of the youngsters around her. Such knowledge of the forest products' value is likely to disappear within few generations, as new artifacts such as soap and western medicine replace them. The pace of this process is only fastened by the school's assertion of superior epistemology, an epistemology in which indigenous knowledge is devalued and omitted.

Knowledge of mathematics comes across as useful in trade relations. A minimum knowledge of counting is necessary when setting a price, or deciding on the distribution of the profit. The Chewong language has indigenous numbers from 1 to 4, for higher numbers they use Malay words. This indicates that counting up to four was sufficient in the earlier days. Although the Chewong were able to count in Malay and deal with money in trade relations in the past (Howell, personal communication), mathematic skills are certainly an advantage. For example, selling gaharu involves rather complicated mathematics as the price is decided on the basis of quality and weight. As pointed out by Colin Nicholas (personal communication); new mathematical knowledge enables them to know when they are cheated, but preventing the cheating requires a different kind of education.

Some of the new school-based information might be experienced as more valuable than the traditional knowledge because of the new circumstances in Kuala Gandah. The villagers' lives are now closer related to people outside their own group, and the ability to read and write fluently in Malay can ease their dealings with outsiders. The children going to school are also less shy when encountering strangers. These are positive aspects, but it seems like the increase of new knowledge is followed by a decrease in traditional indigenous knowledge. The youngsters do not know the traditional myths and songs, they are not very familiar with the Chewong cosmology, and they are not aware of all the cosmological rules relating to behavior. They are also less familiar with the different names and uses of forest products, although their knowledge in this field is impressive compared to urban children. These changes in the children's knowledge are linked to changes in the transfer of expertise and positions of authority.

Positions of authority

The way knowledge is transferred in school differs from the traditional learning systems in the Chewong community. Based on empirical materials from Sabah, Felix Tongkul (2002) describes the main principles in indigenous education systems: “Holistic growth, participatory, nurturance and mutual trust ... Children are free to choose what they want to learn from knowledgeable members of the community...” (ibid:26). Each member of the society plays an important role in equipping the young with relevant knowledge and skills required to lead an independent life. The indigenous Chewong learning system fits well into this description. According to Howell (1989a,b) knowledge of the cosmology and the various rules governing behavior were internalized in everyone from a young age at the time of her first research. This knowledge was seen as common property, and it was important that everyone knew it in order to keep the society balanced. The only esoteric knowledge was the spells used in the healing ceremonies, which only the *putao*¹⁴ knew. Tongkul (2002) defines some ways of acquiring indigenous knowledge, of which the following are relevant for the Chewong situation; apprenticeship, the practice of oral tradition, and direct observation and instruction. In order to become a *putao*, one had to be directly instructed over a period of time by an older man who possessed this knowledge. Through oral traditions, especially myth telling, the young Chewong learned rules and acquired knowledge of how to behave in order to keep themselves and the society healthy. Learning skills related to hunting, gathering, planting, childcare and the like was done through direct observation, active involvement and instruction. In other words, the knowledge sources were multiple, and everyone in the community contributed in the teaching. Traditional knowledge is still transferred in these ways.

In school, the holistic and informal approach is replaced by a single source of knowledge, and the various means of incorporating knowledge is limited. In Primary School, one teacher is responsible for a large number of pupils, restricting the possible teaching methods to instruction. As no one challenges the teachings, the teacher ultimately emerges as an omnipotent holder of knowledge. Whereas the indigenous knowledge was learned mainly by doing, and in constant mutual interaction with the knowledge sources, learning in school is to a large degree a passive one-way process.

¹⁴ Chewong for shaman; the person leading the traditional rituals.

The children have to do what they are told and have little influence on what is conveyed. If they do not understand they are simply left behind. As the children's English teacher told me; there were vast differences in educational level in his class. He felt that he had to follow up the best ones, and consequently leave some behind. He admitted that the Orang Asli pupils did not benefit much from his teachings. This was no wonder, as all instructions were given in English and the Orang Asli children did not even understand which tasks they were going to work on.¹⁵

The positions of authority are fundamentally different between the school system and the Chewong society. Besides that, one can see tendencies of emerging differences as regards authority and knowledge within the Chewong society. One of the well-documented effects of the introduction of schooling to mainly illiterate communities is a tendency for the traditional authority persons' power to decline (Solstad 2001). This is, however, not necessarily negative in all cases. In the Chewong society, there have traditionally not been any leaders holding power over others, but the elders were naturally more knowledgeable as a result of life experience. When schooling is introduced the younger generation becomes more knowledgeable than the elders in some areas. There are increasing tendencies of this in Kuala Gandah. During Christian ceremonies, the young literate girls were given much responsibility. They were reading from the bible and deciding which songs to sing. One young girl was given the responsibility to conduct ceremonies when the missionaries were away. The elder men and women were silent in the background. A related observation illuminates how these changes in knowledge and authority become visible when combined with other social changes, such as new religions. This time it was a young Muslim girl who expressed her advanced position. A wild boar had been caught and was distributed among the villagers. However, one (Muslim) family did not take their share. I asked the mother why not, whereupon she replied that she was afraid that the Malay neighbors would see them eating *haram* (ritually unclean) meat. Immediately her daughter said something to the mother in the Chewong language. The mother then added to her explanation that, of course, they did not *like* to eat pork anymore either. It was obvious that the young girl had corrected her mother on the basis of being more knowledgeable regarding religion and how to

¹⁵ However, the teacher should not be held solely responsible for these problems. He was suffering from a lack of resources, and should have had an additional teacher to help out in the class consisting of up to 30 pupils.

present oneself as a proper Muslim. She knew what the “correct” answer to my question should be.

*

In spite of some dubious effects of formal schooling, education is necessary for the Chewong to be able to participate in the outside society. For lack of better alternatives, I believe that the Chewong children would benefit from the current schooling and should be encouraged to attend. Unfortunately, those who wish to do so still have many obstacles to fight.

4 Increased Monetization

One day Mar caught a big *tapah* fish in Sungai Bayek. He brought the fish back to the village, but instead of sharing it in the community for consumption he decided to sell it. Traditionally, all foodstuff brought back to the settlement was immediately displayed and then shared amongst the people, regardless of the amount. Not to do so would be *punen* (Howell 1989a). I had earlier observed that the rule was still adhered to in some cases in present day Kuala Gandah. So, when I heard that the fish was going to be sold I enquired about *punen*. After all, the fish had been seen by several other villagers, and they did not get their share. Surely such a large fish must have been wanted by the others, and the unfulfilled desire is exactly the reason for *punen* to occur. To share the RM 30 which Mar earned for the fish was never a question. Money is one of the new features which are not integrated into the traditional norms and rules. To my question whether selling the fish instead of sharing it was *punen*, Jirai (Mar's eldest daughter) answered: "Yes, but these days, it's like.. these days we want money (*ya, tapi sekarang, macam.... sekarang mau duit*). The fear of breaking the rule was suppressed in favour of earning money.

In the following I will describe the increased monetization in Kuala Gandah and the changes associated with it. I will investigate new consumption patterns and the consequential struggle to earn enough money. Finally, some implications of the growing market economy will be discussed with regards to the social relations in Kuala Gandah.

Traditional subsistence

According to Howell (1989a), the Chewong men traditionally hunted deer, pigs, and different species of monkeys, birds, bats, lemurs, squirrels, foxes and the binturong. They also went fishing and caught large freshwater terrapins in the rivers. The women went foraging, and planted tapioca, vegetables and other foodstuff. During Howell's first fieldwork meat was brought to the interior settlement of Latah Tujuh approximately every three days, and fish was caught almost every day. Tapioca was planted by the slash-and-burn method, and constituted the staple for the settlements

deep inside the forest. However, already at that time, the people in Kuala Gandah sold enough rattan to eat rice as their staple. Selling *gaharu* and rattan enabled the Chewong to purchase goods from the shop. The villagers inside came out to buy “bush knives, axe heads, spear heads, salt, cloth, kerosene for their lamps, and, whenever some [was] left over, tobacco, rice, and torches” (ibid:22).

Consumption today

Even though the Chewong still use the forest for subsistence, a large part of their food is now purchased at the local shop or at the market in Lanchang. Howell describes how purchased foodstuffs occupy a slightly ambivalent position when it comes to sharing. She explains that neither money nor items obtained by the means of money are incorporated into the *punen* category. Nevertheless, she writes, “the Chewong seem to feel that rice and biscuits, the two commodities bought in large quantities, should be shared amongst members of the same settlement” (Howell 1983:70). This is not the case in Kuala Gandah today. It does happen that people give away purchased foodstuff, but this is the exception rather than the rule. It occasionally occurs when large quantities of meat, fish or vegetables are bought. This is rare, though, as they seldom can afford to buy more than the immediate needs of their own household. Several times my enquiries regarding sharing were answered by the rhetorical question: How can we give away food when we don’t even have enough to eat ourselves?

Only a few households in Kuala Gandah had tapioca plantations. The main staple for all were rice. It was common to hear people complaining of a poor diet and not having enough food in general. As an example, one mother told me that her family had not eaten that day. They were out of rice and did not have money to buy more. When I asked her why they did not cook tapioca she told me they did not have a field anymore. I suggested asking her neighbour for some, as they had a tapioca field right behind their house. She answered, surprisingly, that they did not have any either at that time. This was not the fact, as I had seen them eat tapioca and rice the very same day. I believe her answer was an excuse for not asking them for food. Rather than asking fellow villagers for help, some Chewong prefer to buy food on

credit when they are out of money. The local shopkeeper keeps track of the villagers' debts.

In addition to food, a huge expenditure for several families is motorbikes. When a motorbike is purchased the buyer normally pays a varying amount in cash, while the rest is on credit. A number of men in Kuala Gandah were regularly paying on their motorbike debts, most of them an amount of around RM 100 a month. Mizah's husband Chawong was saving money to buy a motorbike. He wanted to buy a brand new one, and had to save approximately RM 2000 for the first payment. Mizah explained to me how her husband's income from gaharu collecting was used; "first we buy rice, then he gives me some, takes some for himself, and the rest is put away to save for the motorbike". The amount of money put away must have been substantial, because this family seldom ate anything but rice alone, and could only afford one or two meals a day, in spite of the hardworking father. More than half of the adult men in Kuala Gandah owned motorbikes. Buying a motorbike was seen as an investment, as it would make it easier to earn money once obtained. The bikes were used to venture into the forest for hunting, rattan collecting, fishing, collecting honey etc. Often, a group of men would go together on their bikes, and sometimes other men came along as passengers. When the purpose of the journey was to visit some other settlement, the driver brought as many of his family members as possible on the bike (up to four persons), while the rest went on foot. The men living inside the forest used their bikes to go to Kuala Gandah or Lanchang to buy food and other products. Normally, a man would go on his own, leaving space for the goods. This might be one of the reasons why the men inside the forest were generally more comfortable interacting with outsiders than the women were. Some of the women inside were extremely shy and reluctant to talk to me. Now and then the adolescent boys from Kuala Gandah spent time at the local mechanic in Lanchang. They had their bikes repaired, and from time to time had dinner at the small café next door. In contrast, the women never ate out (unless I brought them).

TVs, stereos and other technological items were also desired by the Chewong. Not everyone could afford such luxuries though. The TV antennas outside some of the houses were visible signs of new interests and priorities, and it was clear that a surplus of income triggered increased consumption and not an increase in saving or distribution. Some of the new technologies required electricity. Tanja Winther (2005) describes electricity as a social issue, as it plays a crucial role in various aspects of

everyday human life. In her study from Zanzibar, she shows how the introduction of electricity has led to “changing patterns of the way men and women work, pay visits and relax” (ibid:3). Winter demonstrates how people become associated with objects related to electricity and how they engage other people in this process. In the case of Kuala Gandah, television sets are an example which demonstrates this well. Around five houses in Kuala Gandah have TVs installed, corresponding more or less to those who have electricity. These houses were popular to visit, and certain nights up to twenty people could gather in front of one television screen. The statement “I want to watch TV” was commonly used to explain visits to these houses. In that way, houses possessing televisions became increasingly important places of social gatherings.

Television has made the outside world much closer to the Chewong. People were constantly referring to TV programs, and the children were singing their songs or imitating TV stars. It might be argued that television have replaced the traditional myth telling as entertainment, education and information.

Sources of income

The craving for material goods has led to a constant search for money. The main source of income for most villagers is from selling forest products; only three men in Kuala Gandah have permanent paid work. However, others try their hand as wage labourers from time to time, usually for shorter periods. With regards to a Semai village in the Tapah area, Gomes (2004) proposes reasons as to why wage labour is unpopular among the Semai villagers. Firstly, people have to wait for their wages which are usually paid fortnightly or monthly. Secondly, the Semai generally prefer to work in the forest or along the streams, avoiding the heat of the day. Thirdly, as paid work is planned and directed by others it entails a loss of personal autonomy – unlike the other Semai subsistence activities. While all these arguments appear applicable in a Chewong setting, I will add the problem of unjust treatment as regards wages and work schedules. Taking paid work was perceived as relatively risky; in a new job they never knew how much they would get paid, or whether they would get paid at all.

Taking paid work

Maris is working for the Elephant Sanctuary, as the only Chewong among 24 full-time employees at the centre. He works five days a week, from 8am to 1pm. For this he earns RM 700 a month. Maris finds the job decent; the salary is fair and payment is done on time. Maris' son works at a plywood factory in Jerantut, about an hour's drive from the village. He lives at the factory, and seldom comes home. A few other men have also migrated to work at factories in the past, but they have all returned after a few years – most of them with a wife. The four Jah Hut women in Kuala Gandah all married Chewong men who were seeking work outside. After marriage, the women told me they did not want their husbands to go back to the factory now that they had a family to care for. Additionally, they admitted to being jealous, as many young women were working at the factories.

Maris told me that neither he nor his son wanted to sell forest products as a source of income. He said it was very difficult these days, after too many Malays started to exploit the forest as well. Besides, people from two other Orang Asli groups; the Temuan and the Jah Hut, were increasingly using the same forested areas as a result of deforestation and depletion of their own traditional resource base. In the Chewong area, the land has been cleared and the forest logged right up to the border of the Krau Wildlife Reserve. This leads to a larger strain on limited areas, and is particularly unfortunate for the Chewong and other Orang Asli who still use the forest for subsistence.

Kelawar is employed by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP). His job is to help out with different businesses regarding the Krau Wildlife Reserve. He does not have a fixed schedule, but is called upon when his knowledge or labour is needed. He has held the job for almost three decades. Kelawar is the only Chewong permanently employed in connection with the management of the Reserve, in spite of the Chewong being indigenous experts on the forest and its contents. As mentioned above, the Orang Asli are seldom recognized as owners of land within protected areas, their knowledge of the forest is not acknowledged, and they are disregarded as stakeholders in management issues.

Three men had a temporary employment in a research project under the DWNP when I arrived in Kuala Gandah. Their job was to catch bats by setting up and

checking traps, and for this they each earned RM 700 a month. Their work ended in late March, as the research was over in that area.

Not all stories of short-term employment are as respectable as the above-mentioned. When I came back to Kuala Gandah in late November, Ruhil had taken work for a company who had the contract to cut the vegetation on both sides of the highway near Lanchang. He got enlisted together with another Chewong man, one Malay, and four other Orang Asli from different groups. The men were told they would be paid RM 70 jointly for each kilometre they finished. Initially, several Chewong men were engaged, but they soon quit as they found the job strenuous and the payment unacceptable. They had also heard rumours that the employer could not be trusted. Ruhil told me he would continue, because he needed money to bring his Jah Hut wife back to her original village so that she could see her parents. After less than a month the job was over, but no salary was paid. Disappointed and frustrated, Ruhil borrowed my cell phone to call his boss. Confronted with the demand for money, the boss explained that the pay day had to be postponed, as the money was not there yet. One week and a couple of phone calls later, the boss simply hung up on Ruhil's next attempt. Ruhil then called his other work mates, who could relate the same story; they had been cheated. Feeling powerless, we contacted Colin Nicholas, coordinator of the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns. But it was not much he could do, as Ruhil neither had an employment contract nor knew the name of the company who hired him. Nicholas could tell us that Ruhil's case was fairly common among Orang Asli taking up paid work. Nevertheless, Nicholas kept calling the boss, until he was told that payment had been done; Ruhil had received RM 160 for 16 days of work, amounting to RM 10 a day, far below any decent payment for a hard day's work. As I had already left the village at that time, I could not get this confirmed by Ruhil.

As mentioned by Nicholas, Ruhil's case was far from unique. Personally, I heard a similar story from a Semai family in the Tapah area. The family father had gone to town to find work, as his two daughters were about to start a new school year and thus needed money. After working for one and a half months, the man had not received his promised salary. Scared to be left with nothing, he did not dare to quit the job and return to his village. Such stories of exploitation reflect the unequal power relations between the Orang Asli and the dominant groups. One reason for the continued dominance and exploitation might be the reluctance among some Orang Asli to speak up and claim their rights. Such restraints can have many causes.

According to Endicott (1983), one of the long lasting effects of the slave raiding in the past was the understanding that “the only safe posture to assume in the presence of Malays was that of a passive, supplicating inferior” (ibid:238). To act aggressively at that time would have been to invite injury. Likewise, the Malays always held the upper hand in trade relations, and “in some circumstances [the Malays] were able virtually to dictate what products would be collected, what goods would be given in return, what prices would be paid for both the imports and exports, and even who would act as middlemen” (ibid:241). These attitudes still exist to some extent today, Endicott wrote in 1983. In 2005, I did see clear tendencies of such subordination of the Chewong. In private, the Chewong often condemned the unjust ways of the Malays, but face to face confrontations were rare. Howell (1981) illustrates how this restrained behaviour is seen as a positive personal value among the Chewong. Numerous cosmological rules and prescriptions require close control of emotions, and the only two emotions which are positively encouraged are fear and shyness. Howell juxtaposes the Western doctrine “know thyself” with a seemingly contrasting value of “suppress thyself” among the Chewong (ibid). I will add that the passive and submissive position taken in potential conflict situations can also be caused by a lack of capabilities. Ruhil did not have the education that would prompt him to request a contract of employment. Neither did he know where to turn for help when cheated. Such lack of capabilities (as autonomy, confidence, and knowledge of basic civil rights) can be seen to develop from the authorities’ enduring dominance and control. Even though some small proportions of the Orang Asli now have started to claim their rights on a political level, it is a fact that the Director-General of the JHEOA still can, according to the law, control entry into Orang Asli abodes, prohibit the planting of any specific plant in Orang Asli settlements, permit and regulate the felling of forest within traditional Orang Asli areas, permit and regulate the taking of forest produce, birds and animals from Orang Asli areas, and even prescribe the terms upon which Orang Asli may be employed, amongst other things (Nicholas 2000). In fact, the mere existence of the JHEOA, with all higher positions held by Malays, is evidence of domination.

In other words, it is not hard to understand why most of the Chewong opt for trade in forest products as a main source of income – an activity which allows them to enjoy their autonomy and self-determination – although they cannot completely escape exploitation in this way either.

Trading in forest products

Forest products are sold to local shopkeepers, middlemen and private people outside the village. The resources exploited vary according to the season. As an example, some of the men put away all other work once the honey season started in June. Because my fieldwork was limited to six months, I was not able to observe the yearly cycle. During my stay three main products were exploited for sale; rattan, gaharu and honey.

Rattan

Different kinds of rattans are collected by the Chewong. When I arrived in February most of the families were busy collecting *sega* rattan. Both men and women went on daytrips into the surrounding forest, and came back to the village with bundles of rattan. In the village they had to scrape it before it was sold to a Chinese middleman for RM 25 for a bundle of 100 pieces. In early March I was told by the villagers that all the rattan in the nearby areas had been collected, and it would take a couple of years until the new plants were long enough to be gathered for sale. However, they could still collect *kerai* rattan, but this work had a somewhat different procedure as it was found in areas further away from the village. As the *kerai* rattan did not have to be scraped as the *sega*, it was normally sold on the spot to the middleman who came there. Because the *kerai* grew in areas far away, the men preferred to travel there by motorbikes. They normally stayed in the area for several days each time. It was not common for the wives and children to come along. Miah told me that she would like to follow and had asked her husband for permission. But he refused by the contention that it was better for her to stay at home and take care of their two children, as it would be a hassle to bring them along. Nevertheless, I did observe one wife going together with her husband. This family had only one small child, which made travelling with the whole family on the motorbike easier. When this family left to collect *kerai* rattan they spent several weeks inside the forest.

Gaharu

Gaharu, also called agarwood, aloewood or eaglewood, is resinous, fragrant and extremely valuable heartwood, resulting from a fungal infection in the gaharu tree. In the end of the middlemen-chain, the gaharu is exported to the Middle East where it is used as an ingredient in perfumes (replacing alcohol, which is *haram*). The Chewong can earn a lot if they are lucky to find high grade gaharu. At the time of my research a kilogram of Grade A gaharu could yield as much as RM 6-7000. Unfortunately, the Chewong hardly ever find such high quality stuff. In fact, it is rather difficult to find any gaharu at all. It takes experience to identify the trees that might contain gaharu; only certain signs such as peeling bark and falling leaves can give an indicator (Nicholas 2000:73). The Chewong are experienced harvesters, and able to determine if a tree contains gaharu without destructive felling.

At the time of my fieldwork, the Chewong used to go in groups to look for gaharu. Both men and women could join, although most of the time groups of men went alone. From time to time whole families ventured into the forest in search for this highly valued product. It was normal to spend several nights inside the forest, only to come out when they had found enough to sell. All too often, though, it happened that a group spent a long time inside the forest without finding anything. The income from gaharu harvesting is therefore highly uncertain, as one can work for weeks without any profit.

When the Chewong come across a tree with the signs of fungal infection, the tree has to be chopped down before they can start searching for gaharu in the inner trunk. Howell describes the procedures as follows:

“men, women and children, with their axes and machetes... would all position themselves along the trunk and start hacking at it. As soon as someone found a dark (i.e. diseased) bit he/she would summon the rest and a frantic search began at the same spot. Whoever actually cut loose a piece was the owner of it.” (Howell 1983:74)

Today the procedures are somewhat different. The group of people working on the same tree as a rule share the gaharu found, no matter who actually cut loose the piece. However, it did happen that once someone kept his finding for himself, but this was condemned by the others.

Wild Honey

The honey season started in May.¹⁶ Only a few of the men exploited this possibility as the work was hard and dangerous. The honey was always collected by a group of men working together. The hives were found in the top of very high trees, and to be able to reach them the men built tall ladders of wood. When the night came and it was completely dark, one of the men brought a burning bundle of bark to the top of the tree where the hive was. He then shook the bark over the hive to make sparks. When the sparks fell towards the ground, most of the bees followed them, attracted by the light. He could then start to cut the hive and put it into a bucket which was taken to the ground by a long rattan rope. One or two pails of wax and honey could be filled from each hive. The men would normally spend a whole night on one or two hives, in addition to earlier preparations such as collecting materials for, and the building of, ladders.

The wax had to be squeezed and removed before the honey could be sold. The buyers were local shopkeepers and other neighbours outside the village. Without exception the buyers subtracted two kilograms from the total amount, arguing that it was for the pieces of wax mixed in. This even happened when there clearly was no wax at all, only pure honey. The Chewong were upset because of this, and claimed to be cheated. However, I did not hear anyone argue on the arrangement. One time Mar and three other Chewong men sold a large amount of honey to the local shopkeeper. Based on the weight, they agreed on a price of RM 400. However, the shopkeeper did not have the cash, and paid them RM 100 while the rest was supposed to be paid later. Deh told me she was disappointed, as Mar's share of RM 25 was not enough to buy what they were in need for. Two weeks later, another RM 100 was paid, but still RM 200 was owing. At this point Deh and Mar started questioning the deal. Deh had seen the shopkeeper's wife buying sarongs at the local market, and drew the conclusion that they in fact did have the cash. Mar commented that this was typical of the Malays; they could never be trusted. He then told a story about the middleman who used to buy bananas from them. This man had several times taken bananas and promised to pay for them later, but they never received the money.

¹⁶ Interestingly, the use of honey was never observed by Howell in her numerous visits to the Chewong (personal communication). This illuminates of how the utilization of subsistence sources varies, from eager persuasion in periods to non-existence in other periods.

Other products

Rattan, gaharu and honey were at different times, according to the season, the main income for many Chewong. In addition, some cash earning activities were done throughout the year. A few families had rubber trees, from which they extracted rubber to sell. More families were trying to plant rubber, but failed over and over again because of wild boars eating the young trees. The Chewong explained that this was a big problem these days because of the logging activities nearby. The wild boars were now restricted to a smaller area, and therefore came closer to the settlements. The wild boars were more afraid in the old days, I was told. A solution would be to build fences around the rubber plantations, but this was strenuous work. According to Howell (personal communication), it was common to build traps around the fields during the time of her main research. I once saw a trap like this inside the forest, but as far as I know traps were not erected nearby Kuala Gandah. The size of Kuala Gandah today delays information sharing, and erected traps pose a real danger for the uninformed. Additionally, the proximity to the Malays, who are repulsed by the consumption of wild boars, might discourage the use of traps.

Women and children frequently collected different kinds of vegetables from the forest. Most of the time it was used for their own consumption, but occasionally it was sold to local shopkeepers. In such cases the buyers often came to the village in advance, and requested a certain amount of this and that, whereby one or two women went looking for it. The rambutans were ripe around June. The fruit could be collected close by the village, but I only saw it sold once, when a busload of Japanese tourists came to the village and someone asked to buy rambutans. One woman then gathered some branches which she sold for a fair price. The durians started to ripe a bit later. It was insatiably consumed by the Chewong, but not sold. When I urged a man in need of money to sell some durians, he replied that he did not know who wanted to buy it, and that, he continued pessimistically; he would most likely get cheated in any case. In late November many families had collected large quantities of the fruit keranji. The fruits were stored in huge piles of cloth bags under the houses, waiting for the middleman to come and buy them. However, when he finally arrived, he told them that the keranji fruit was not saleable (*laku*) this year, and hence he did not want to buy a single kilo. The Chewong were surprised, as they had been selling this fruit

every year in the past. Now they did not know what to do with all the harvested fruit, and after eating some, the rest was simply left to decay.

It was at this point of time that Deh and Mar decided to move into the forest. They did not have enough money to buy rice, and wanted to supplement their diet with maize. The soil around Kuala Gandah is not suitable for planting, so they moved a couple of kilometres into the forest and set up new houses. Here, they made a large plantation of maize, tapioca and some herbs. Occasionally, they brought some maize to Kuala Gandah where they could sell it.

Frogs, and occasionally large turtles, were caught by the men and sold to Chinese in Lanchang.

I never witnessed anyone in the village sell products to other Chewong. If someone craved for maize, they simply went to visit Deh and Mar, and would be provided with as much as they wanted. During the durian season, Mar and two sons went to the settlement of Kalung, where they gathered two huge bags of durians which they brought back to their house. I never heard the sharing of fruits or maize questioned, neither did I witness anyone trade within their own group. As an example, Deh was busy making some new baskets of rattan. Miah was in need of a basket, but did not know how to make it herself, so she asked Deh to sell her one. Deh immediately started to make her a basket, but explained that she could never accept money for it. If her friends asked her for something she would give it for free, she stated. The only time I saw someone pay for a favour internally was when Kelawar, who was working for the Wildlife Department, and another man needed a ride back to the village from Bukit Rengit, a few kilometres from the village. Kelawar had in advance asked two young boys to pick them up in the afternoon. For this he paid them RM 10 each. It was only in exceptional situations that anyone borrowed a motorbike from someone else. But if they did, they always paid them one or two Ringgit for the petrol.



Chewong men are selling rattan to a local Chinese middleman.



Kelawar selling bananas



Jirai selling vegetables

The significance of money

Based on the articles in the anthology *Money and the morality of exchange* (1989) Parry and Bloch argue that to be able to understand the meaning of money the specificity of the particular symbolic system and the way in which historical forces act on and transform an existing cultural template have to be taken into account (Parry and Bloch 1989:30). This argument supports the aim of an understanding of the interplay between the Chewong indigenous traditions, power relations and social changes, like increased monetization. The two categories of indigenous tradition and monetization relates to Parry and Bloch's division between a short-term exchange cycle, which is the (often acquisitive) domain of the individual, and a cycle of long-term exchanges concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order (ibid:2). Parry and Bloch criticise anthropologists for often overestimating the transformative potential of money. Personally, I am not arguing that money alone is transforming the Chewong society. However, I do believe that, *as part of a wider set of social changes*, increased monetization contributes to a change in the interpretations and importance attributed to the indigenous cosmology, and next to a change of social relations in the village. This is exemplified above in the story of Mar breaking the rule of *punen* by selling his fish instead of sharing it with the others. I observed people choosing to sell food instead of sharing several times. This applied to meat, fruits, vegetables and honey. Even though the rule of *punen* seldom was mentioned in such instances, it was likely a matter of consideration. For instance, I once observed a man and a woman do the *punen touch* on a big river terrapin which was to be sold. Many people came to see this remarkable big animal, but only two persons went over to it and slightly touched it with their fingertips. This "punen touch" is normally used when someone refuses to participate in a meal (if they do not want their share). There are two ways of doing the "punen touch". The person offering food can touch the food first and then the wrist of the person refusing, or the person who do not want to eat can touch the food herself. The touch is said to remove the danger of breaking the *punen* rule. In the case of the terrapin, only two individuals did the touch, although many people were present. Noticeably, the others seemed not to worry about *punen* in this situation.

Parry and Bloch argue that all systems have to make an ideological space which open up for individual acquisition, “but that such activities are consigned to a separate sphere which is ideologically articulated with, and subordinated to, a sphere of activity concerned with the cycle of long-term reproduction” (1989:26). Furthermore, the two spheres must be kept separate, but at the same time be related. “The possibility of conversion between the two orders ... has much to do with their moral evaluation” (ibid). As the rules based on the Chewong cosmology do not apply to money, it is possible to define money transactions as a separate sphere. However, there seems to be no moral devaluation of this sphere, and conversion does happen in certain cases. As an example, when someone is getting married it is common these days to give money to the couple’s families as a contribution to the party¹⁷. I also once witnessed a man, who had earned a considerable amount of money by selling gaharu, spend it all on a party for the village in connection with his newborn daughter’s first hair shaving.¹⁸ However, it is an exception that money earned by an individual benefits the whole society.

Why is there no moral condemnation of people choosing to pursue individual acquisition in favour of public benefits? I will argue that this is connected to other changes in the society. Even though the Chewong to a large extent condemn the morality of the Malays, they are nevertheless influenced by them and do to a certain degree adopt their habits and perspectives. The Orang Asli are perceived by the majority in Malaysia to be backward and inferior¹⁹, and are constantly urged to change their habits and life styles. Although the feeling is ambivalent, most of the Chewong that I met look with fascination on the modern ways of living, as they for example see on TV. Money and the commodities one can buy for money is a sign of this modernity, and is therefore admired more than condemned. In fact, I will claim that there is a tendency for the (lack of) rules in the sphere of money to influence the traditional system of reciprocity, not the other way around.

¹⁷ Parties in relation to weddings were not common in the past, according to Howell (personal communication)

¹⁸ A tradition derived from his wife’s group, the Jah Hut.

¹⁹ As an example the son of the local shopkeeper called his Chewong neighbours “monkeys” (*beruk*). (Whereupon Deh commented sarcastically that he nevertheless did let the “monkeys” shop in his store.)

Social relations and the norm of sharing

Without knowing the history of the Chewong society one can easily be impressed by the generous people there. Yet, by comparing today's situation with the descriptions of the Chewong 25 years ago, a development towards decreased sharing can be detected. Traditionally, all foodstuffs had to be brought back to the village where it was displayed in public before everyone got their share. This happened no matter how small the amount of food was. As an illustration Howell (1989a) describes an occasion where 11 people shared one small squirrel. This was done in accordance with the rule of *punen*. Today, the content of this rule is somewhat different. I was told that one only had to share the food if it was seen by others. If no one saw you bringing the food into your house, there was no need to share it. If, however, you met someone on the way, you should give this person a share – not to do so would be *punen*. There has, in other words, been a slight change in the interpretation of the rule.

My observations of sharing practises in Kuala Gandah today correspond largely to Gomes' (2004) description of the situation among the Tapah Semai, another Orang Asli group. Gomes uses his empirical data to question Geertz' "shared poverty" model. While studying Javanese economy, Geertz found that the introduction of cash crops did not bring about class polarisation. The reason for this, Geertz argued, was the Javanese custom of sharing labour and products (Geertz 1963 in Gomes 2004). Gomes, on the contrary, demonstrates how the food distribution practices which he observed among the Semai had minimal effects in levelling off disparities in food supplies. He claims that the distribution of food was based on a balanced rather than generalised reciprocity, because a household over time would receive approximately as much as they gave away. Hence, "its potentiality in redistributing food surplus among households is undermined" (Gomes 2004:173). The sharing of food in Kuala Gandah today can also be defined as balanced reciprocity. I observed that patterns of sharing tended to cut across family relations. As an example, Deh usually gave food to two or three households only, and always the same ones. These were the same households as she normally received food from. Significantly, I never saw Deh offer food to her older sister Kampit, who lived nearby. When I enquired about this, she told me that she used to give earlier, but stopped because Kampit never returned the gifts. She went on to declare that this was not right, as they were sisters and therefore should be generous to each other. It did not seem to occur

to Deh that because Kampit was a widow she might be disadvantaged when it comes to accumulate income and food. What was stressed was the lack of reciprocity.

Emerging gender inequalities

Changes in gender relations have been described by researchers working in several Orang Asli communities, and Nicholas et al. (2002) states that there is a general consensus that gender inequality among Orang Asli is a fairly recent phenomenon. However, the effect of colonialism and capitalism on gender roles are debated, and many anthropologists doubt the existence of egalitarian societies altogether, claiming that gender inequality is universal (e.g. Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, in Howell 1985). Nevertheless, Moore (1988) writes that the sexual division of labour is constantly being transformed and re-created as social and economic change takes place, but the way capitalism affects rural production systems – and I will add social relations – depends on the indigenous social formations. Therefore a historical focus is advantageous, according to Moore. In addition, Howell (1985) argues, gender roles cannot be divorced from the collective representations of a society as a whole. In the article “Equality and Hierarchy in Chewong Classification” (1985), Howell disagrees with the assertion of universal gender inequalities and argues that equality has been the main structural principle in the Chewong ideology. In the late 1970s, the Chewong society was co-extensive with their cosmos, and the various super human beings were perceived as “people like us” or “our people”. The relationship with these beings was constantly reinforced through processes of exchange in the daily life of the Chewong. Because of this everyday relationship no useful distinction could be drawn between the Chewong’s sacred and profane activities, and Howell sees this as evidence for a reluctance to create hierarchical oppositions. In the traditional gender-based working patterns men usually hunted while women were gatherers and child minders, but “although certain activities tend to be carried out by men, and others by women, both may, and frequently do, participate in all. Relative status is not associated with any particular task” (ibid:171). However, the recent changes in the Chewong society seem to have an impact on these gender roles. After a revisit to the Chewong in 1981, Howell discusses whether a gender stratification was about to emerge in their society. In her article “Chewong Women in Transition: the effects of monetisation on a

hunter-gatherer society in Malaysia” (1983) she analyzes changes in gender relations as an effect of monetization and outside influence, and depicts emerging tendencies for the men to gain economic power over women. With increased integration into the market economy, the men became the principal cash earners, and took on the role as decision makers in money matters. Correspondingly I observed gendered working patterns in relation to cash earning activities, and I would like to draw attention to the significant role of motorbikes in this process today. Currently, around half of the men in Kuala Gandah own motorbikes, and the bikes are increasingly used in cash earning activities such as collecting gaharu and rattan, hunting, and fishing. Often when the men venture on their motorbikes into the forest to work, they stay away for several days, leaving the women and children behind. This is not to say, though, that husband and wife do not work together anymore. Certain tasks, such as house building, is done collectively, and occasionally women and men go together to search for gaharu. As for other aspects of the Chewong society, there are individual differences in gender roles, and in some families the women have become more dependent on their husbands for subsistence needs than in others. Deh, for example, often go searching for gaharu together with Mar, and when they planted maize, it was Deh and her daughters who sold some of it to a Malay woman working at the market.

During my fieldwork it occurred to me what a boost it seemed to be for the men’s confidence to own a motorbike. According to Tanja Winther (2005), objects are loaded with meaning and norms, and objectification is a dialectical process where “people’s relations to artifacts both reflect and create cultural ideas” (ibid:12). Because none of the women²⁰ drove motorbikes, the use of bikes has created an exclusive male activity sphere. The young men and adolescent boys spent considerable time working on their bikes, either in the village or at the local mechanic in Lanchang. The motorbikes were used as a means of travel and a tool in cash earning activities, but it was also a source of enjoyment. Frequently, young men drove around the village for fun – often with small children on their laps²¹. The increased use of motorbikes contributes to men’s power over women. Several times I heard women complain that they wanted to go to the market but that the husband was too lazy and refused to bring them. Hence, in accordance with Winther’s argument, the

²⁰ Except Miah, an in-married Jah Hut who had learned to drive in her home village.

²¹ Demonstrating continuity in men’s participation in child-rearing.

men's relation to motorbikes can be seen to have created an acceptance of men's control over their wives in certain circumstances.

What distinguishes the situation regarding motorbikes compared to previous gender-based differences is the importance attributed to the former because of its substantial economic significance. No one questions the amount of money used on bikes. When Mizah told me how much of their total income was spent to save for a motorbike, I asked her whether she felt this was fair. After all, the husband would be the owner and the user of the bike. Mizah said she had no problems with it, as having a bike would increase his earnings. She did not reflect on the fact that her husband wanted a very expensive bike, "similar to Sulaiman's", the man who owned the most fashionable and powerful bike in the village. In order to ease cash earning activities, I believe a much cheaper bike would do as well.

However, monetization and the use of motorbikes is not the only reason for an emerging gender hierarchy. As Howell (1985) calls attention to, increased interaction with Malays and Chinese are exposing the Chewong to different gender patterns. Today, these effects are proliferated through religious teachings and through television programmes, through which the Chewong are faced with an image of the man's superiority. In addition, Nicholas et al. (2002) point to the importance of JHEOA officials and other government functionaries who excludes Orang Asli women in political functions. As an example, the JHEOA invariably appoints men to the position as village heads (*batin*). From my own fieldwork, I also noticed such administrative subordination of women in relation to birth certificates and identification cards, in which the role of the child's father is superior to that of the mother.

That gender relations in the Chewong society are influenced by the recent changes – at least to a certain degree – is revealed in the men's economic power and increasing control over their wives. In addition, I have witnessed even more daunting developments. In one family the husband is guilty of recurring spousal abuse. I also experienced another man hit his wife on one occasion. These episodes can be seen as signs of decreasing respect of women, but they also go against the cosmological prescription of control of emotionality and the egalitarian quality of the cosmic order as described above, and thus calls into question the current status of Howell's observation of equality as the main structural principle in the Chewong ideology. It

seems like the recent changes in Kuala Gandah have slightly disturbed this equality as regards gender.

5 Religious change

Indigenous Chewong cosmology

The indigenous Chewong cosmology, including myths, songs and a range of prescriptions and proscriptions, used to structure the everyday life of the Chewong. The Chewong universe consists of eight worlds placed in layers. Humans live in earth seven, while the immortal superhuman beings belong in earth six and above. Most superhuman beings have the potential for both harming and helping human beings. Despite the number of different superhuman beings, there is no general classification as to their relative status or importance. Repercussions in form of mishaps and disease are caused by transgression of rules, not because of “evil” qualities in the superhumans. The difference between humans and superhumans are found in their different eyes, their different ways of perceiving the world. (Howell 1985, 1989a, 1996)

The Chewong cosmology is a coherent set of ideas which explains the connections of the universe, and provides the rules of life. “Social relationships of all kinds (in this instance including cosmological ones) are dynamic relations, and they have to be re-created by all those concerned” (Howell 1985:174). So, what happens then, when 15 out of 18 families in Kuala Gandah convert to Christianity and Islam?

In the following I will describe the missionaries’ arrival and subsequent work in Kuala Gandah. I will look at the processes of conversion, and I will discuss the impact of new religions on the Chewong society.

The arrival of the missionaries

The Christians

The Christian missionaries who arrived in 2001 were from the SS Gospel Centre, a part of the international Brethren movement. The Brethren Churches are conservative, fundamental (as in holding on to the Bible as literally true), and Evangelical

Protestant. The SS Gospel Centre is based in Kuala Lumpur, but have several regional churches attached to it (personal communication with the missionaries). At the time of my fieldwork, representatives regularly came to Kuala Gandah from two churches attached to the Gospel Centre. The Centre carries out missionary activities among the Orang Asli in a wide area. The missionaries themselves informed me on their procedures: When they first arrive in an Orang Asli village, they normally put up a video show in order to attract attention and to inform the villagers on the basic features of Christianity. This was done likewise in Kuala Gandah. One of the missionaries also ventured further into the forest to Kampung Bayek, a small settlement with three families situated approximately one hour's walk from Kuala Gandah. Here, however, the missionary was discouraged by what he called "shy and uncivilized" inhabitants, who ran away when they saw him. In addition, he found the walk through dense rain forest very strenuous and dangerous. The missionary activities were therefore limited to Kuala Gandah, where it is possible to reach by car.²²

Soon after the Christians arrived they decided to provide the village with sanitary facilities. Two toilets and one room for showers were built. They also promised to give rice and other necessities in times of need to the families who converted. Needless to say, such manoeuvres worked to gain the villagers confidence. The Chewong were soon asked to build a new house, in a traditional style, and the missionaries provided a corrugated iron roof for what was to become the church (*gereja*). The church looks like any other house in the village, and does not attract attention from neighbours or visitors. For the same reason, the missionaries always arrive after dark. As will be explained below, the Christians have good reasons for keeping a low profile.

During my fieldwork, services were held every Saturday night in the village. Activities were organized for the children simultaneously in another house. The children sang hymns, listen to stories from the Bible, and made drawings based on the stories. Sometimes they practiced mathematics and reading. One of the missionaries expressed her deep concern for the children who did not attend school. Her main concern regarded the language – if the children did not learn Malay, how were they

²² Nevertheless, a few men living deeper inside the forest chose to attend services in Kuala Gandah and eventually joined the Christians.

going to teach them Christianity? The missionaries always brought a bit of snacks for those who attended.

The services for the adults were characterized by Bible reading and singing. A special book had been made in which hymns were translated into the Chewong language. When the missionaries came from Kuala Lumpur, the organizing of the service was slightly different. The people from Kuala Lumpur preferred to gather the children and the adults. During singing sessions they were more physically active, using arm movements and clapping. Often the songs were in English, as part of an attempt to teach them a bit of this language. However, only the young and literate joined in when these songs came up.

The village head (*batin*) was the first to be approached and asked to *masuk Kristian* (enter Christianity). Batin Bak accepted and, as the missionaries requested, appealed to his fellow villagers to follow his example. Eight families²³ from Kuala Gandah and two men from inside the forest accepted. Most of them were tempted by the promises of rice and other material benefits. Others explained that they accepted because of the Christians' promise of "a good life". One woman told me that she felt disappointed. The Christians had promised her a better life, but she could not notice much difference. Life was still hard, she sighed. She said she did not understand what it was all about when the Christians first arrived. Nevertheless, now that she had *masuk*, she could just as well attend the Saturday meetings as it did happen from time to time that they got gifts such as second hand clothes, detergents, or cooking pots. She had also asked the missionaries for a contribution when she wanted to install electricity, and they had given her RM 300, which covered more than half of the cost. – And in fact it was quite nice to get together and sing sometimes, she admitted. Others again, such as Rosnani, a young mother of two, explained to me that she liked the stories the missionaries told. Now she was not afraid of walking alone or staying alone in the house, as she knew that "God was always with her". Rosnani is enthusiastic regarding Christianity, and is often given the responsibility for the Saturday services if the missionaries cannot attend. When the missionaries are away, significantly fewer people turn up from for the ceremonies.

²³ I here use the term family for a married couple with their children.

Some of the adults have attended a course in Cameron Highlands arranged by the SS Gospel Centre. They stayed there for three days. Later, they were baptized in Sungai Teris, the river next to Kuala Gandah.

The Muslims

The Muslim missionaries came to Kuala Gandah the year after the Christians. According to the Islam teacher Saliah, the Muslims were sent to Kuala Gandah by *Pejabat Agama* (the religious office). In the village they started their *Program Beramal*²⁴ to make the Chewong *masuk Islam*. Included in this program were village parties (*kenduri*) with food and drinks. In 2002, such parties were arranged twice. The year after, it was intensified into four parties, and Saliah was employed to teach in the village. Her accommodation was arranged for in the staff quarters next to the Elephant Sanctuary. A prayer house (*surau*) was built at the entrance of Kuala Gandah, and Saliah teaches there two or three afternoons a week.

The villagers were enticed to convert to Islam because of money offers. A family with one or two children would get RM 300 if they all converted. A larger family could get up to RM 500. The amount was quickly spent on food and other necessities. Additionally, the families were promised electricity, but this was never given. Several of the Chewong were persuaded by the offers. At the time of my fieldwork nine families had converted to Islam.²⁵ However, only a small number attended the afternoon meetings in the prayer house. Of those who attended, the young and literate was taught to read the Quran. Everyone learned to sing in Arabic. Saliah also included some information on health, cleanliness, and nutrition in her lessons. Moral guiding was given when she found it necessary, as for example when one young Muslim boy married a Christian girl. The boy, Joe, did not go to the prayers, and Saliah was only informed about the wedding when it was over. She obviously disliked the situation, and elaborated on the problems this new couple might face in the future. She then advised the girls (only girls were present this afternoon) to look for good Muslim husbands.

²⁴ *Beramal* = to do meritorious work

²⁵ This includes two families who switched from Christianity to Islam. One of these was the Batin, who would lose his position (and salary) if he was Christian because the JHEOA would not accept this, according to Saliah.



Afternoon lesson in the *surau* (prayer hall) at the outskirts of Kuala Gandah.



Kampit dressed for Muslim prayers (left) and for a *nöpoh* (right).

Development through religion

The Christian and Muslim missionaries share a disregard of the traditional Chewong cosmology. No matter how sophisticated this world view is, with its eight earths housing numerous species of superhumans, and its detailed prescriptions for everyday behavior and social interaction (Howell 1989a), the missionaries fail to acknowledge

it as a religion. The Chewong are told that they should *get* a religion. The word “conversion” is not used; instead they talk about *masuk* (*enter*) Christianity or Islam. The Chewong are perceived as tabula rasa – ready to be inscribed. Adopting a religion is part of the modernization process, a means to overcome backward traditions. One of the Christian missionaries who regularly held services in Kuala Gandah expressed his concern for the “un-civilized and anti-social” Chewong. He saw the solution to this “problem” to be education and religious training, so that the Chewong could be developed and brought into the mainstream society.

This view is not uncommon in the dominant groups of the population, and the basic premises can be recognized in the government’s official policies. As mentioned above, the government’s assimilation and “development” strategies are infused with Islam. Nicholas (2000) shows how the government uses a variety of methods in order to Islamize the Orang Asli. Positive discrimination provides Muslim Orang Asli with material benefits. Community Development Officers work in villages to promote Islam in combination with general development. Prayer halls have been built in a vast number, even in villages where no one has accepted Islam (Nicholas 2000).

In late 1997, the outgoing head of the JHEOA denied that there was a program to Islamize or assimilate Orang Asli. But in 1983, the department had circulated a secret plan in Malay, which was to cost about U.S. \$5.5 million. The title was “Strategy for the Development of Islamic Religion among Orang Asli Groups,” and the stated two objectives were “Islamization throughout Orang Asli society” and “Integration/Assimilation between Orang Asli and Malay society. (Dentan 2000:223)

The former Director-General of the JHEOA has stated, in connection with his farewell press release; “I am proud to have been involved in various direct and indirect non-compulsion efforts to convey the message of Islam to our Orang Asli cousins” (Ikram 1998, in Nicholas 2000:101). This was stated by the former Director-General of the very same JHEOA which has as their *official* vision

...to ensure that Orang Asli community achieves a level of socio-economic well-being at par with those of other communities in this country, and imbued with ethical values while at the same time *maintaining their identity*. (JHEOA official webpage, my emphasis)

The policies adopted by the JHEOA evidently contradict the aim of maintaining the Orang Asli identities, and indicate a huge gap between the official aims and objectives and de facto action. Dentan (2000) argues that Islamizing the Orang Asli is an attempt

by the government to solve the contradiction inherent in the Malay indignity (see chapter 2). A Muslim Orang Asli fulfils all criteria for a Malay identity.

Religious tensions

When I asked one of the men going to church why he had converted to Christianity, he explained to me that they had to choose *some* religion, and he preferred Christianity as it was “easy” (*senang*). When asked why he had not considered the “Chewong religion” as an option, he laughed and stated that it was no proper religion. In fact, he continued, Christianity was not very proper either, as there were neither food prescriptions nor rigid prayer times as in Islam. His undervaluation of the Chewong religion (and even Christianity) is a typical example of how recognitional domination might work; “projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized” (Taylor 1992, in Lukes 2005:119).

Opting for Christianity can be seen as a form of resistance to Malay domination. By embracing Christianity the Chewong oppose the government’s attempts to assimilate them into the Malay ethnic group. However, they also fail to obtain the Muslims’ economic inducements, and this was probably the reason to why some “switched” to Islam when offered money. Hence, the resistance aspect of conversion to Christianity does not seem to be weighty.

The Christian converts are disfavored by the authorities. Deh told me the following story, which took place a short period after the Batin had switched from Christianity to Islam: The shopkeeper at the entrance of the village is the village head of the Malays living in the area around Bolok. His area of responsibility ends at Kuala Gandah, which is Batin Bak’s liability. The shopkeeper, himself Malay, was troubled by the Christian missionaries’ activities in Kuala Gandah, and told Batin Bak that the Christians could not be trusted. He claimed they were distributing alcohol in the village, and urged Batin Bak to contact the police. Batin Bak, who is rather easy to persuade, did as he was told. The police came, and searched the house of Deh and Mar for alcohol. Deh told me that she felt frightened, even though they had nothing to hide. Ever since that incidence, Deh continued, she had been irritated and disappointed with Batin Bak.

Another sign of emerging divisions between the two new groups in Kuala Gandah can be gleaned from new sharing practices. I have already mentioned above how increased monetization has had an impact on sharing relations in the community. Likewise, the food taboos in Islam draws invisible borders between the Muslims and the Christians and non-converts. The Christians hardly ever share their food with Muslim converts, although most of the Chewong Muslims do not follow the religious food taboos. The new practices can be seen as a pragmatic solution to the problem of the large size of the village and the relatively limited amount of food. It is simply not possible to share with all in Kuala Gandah, and the haram rules are a good excuse for excluding some. As the sharing of food works through balanced reciprocity, the Christians will not receive food from the Muslims either. Hence, the two religious groups now share their food within their own group only.

Nevertheless, the Christian and Muslim converts in Kuala Gandah maintain their friendship, and argues strongly that religion does not split up their society. However, the new generation is brought up with religious instruction and might become more devoted than their parents. What will happen in the future is therefore an open question, especially so because local developments often reflect wider trends. The political tension between the Muslim authorities and Christians in Malaysia is a fact, and the Christian missionaries in Kuala Gandah can be said to undertake a “courageous” exercise as they undermine the authorities’ attempts to assimilate the Orang Asli through Islamization. One of the missionaries reflected on this issue and argued; “In many Muslim countries, being a Christian means identifying with the less-privileged minority. There is a price for the local there in the kampung [village] to pay to be a Christian” (personal e-mail communication). He was referring to the converts of Kuala Gandah, and pointed to some challenges faced by Christian Orang Asli. For example, in December 2005, the Malaysian newspaper *New Sunday Times* reported that a Christian church in the village Orang Laut Masai had been demolished by the authorities. The church had been built at a cost of RM 40 000, of which RM 10 000 was raised by the Orang Asli themselves and the remainder by the missionaries. It had been in use for two months when it was demolished the 15th of December. Some 300 people representing various government units witnessed the demolition. The reason for the drastic act was, according to a spokesman from the Johore Baru Land Office, that “the church was standing on state land and the construction was therefore illegal” (New Sunday Times, 18.12.2005). A similar

incident happened in the Semai village Kampung Sungei Srigala in 1990. Dental et al. (1997) discuss this episode and sum up: “This incident illustrates some of the serious legal and practical problems facing the Orang Asli today. These include violations of their constitutionally guaranteed personal rights by government agencies, lack of rights over the land they live on, and weak support from the agency charged with protecting their rights, the JHEOA” (ibid:69).

From significant localities to imposed formalities

The indigenous Chewong cosmology is not regarded as a religion by the Chewong, as it has always been embedded in their everyday practices and localities. Christianity and Islam, on the contrary, include imposed rules and prescriptions, characteristics they are taught to associate with religion.

One day when I was walking in the forest with a group of children, some of them suddenly started singing. Their voices were loud and clear, and drowned the otherwise piercing sounds of the rain forest. However, one song after the other was in Malay. I could recognize some from those coming out from the TVs and stereos in the village. When I enquired whether the children knew other songs, they started singing songs they had learned by the missionaries and at school. I was surprised by the answer when I asked them to sing something in Chewong, their mother tongue. They did not know any. I tried to insist, saying that maybe they could try a little bit only. They then told me that they were shy (*malu*).

In an article exploring formal speech acts, Howell distinguishes three such acts in the Chewong society; songs, spells and myths (Howell 1986). Whereas myths are collective knowledge static over time, songs are individually created and dynamically allow the addition of new knowledge. This personal quality of Chewong songs might partly explain the children’s unwillingness to sing them, but the preference for “popular songs” in Malay is certainly a result of outside influence.

Myths, according to Howell (ibid:8), “represent a major part of Chewong group identity”. It is of outmost importance that the myths are told over and over again to children for them to integrate the knowledge. “If we do not remember the stories from long ago we do not know how [to] do things properly” was a common statement given to Howell at the time of her main fieldwork (ibid). These days, by

contrast, the Chewong are told “how to do things properly” by outsiders. The missionaries, school teachers, health workers, and Malay neighbours, all inform the Chewong about the guidelines of modern living. Perhaps can this account for the decline in singing and myth telling. In the house where I stayed, I never experienced gatherings in the evenings where myths were told. The evenings were rather used watching television in Jirai’s house. Nevertheless, upon my enquiry Deh could give some examples of myths. In these cases the myths she told resembled those gathered by Howell (1982). Jirai, the eldest daughter, knew some of them, but the younger people present did not recognize any. Deh maintained she had been telling them the stories, but that they forgot so easily. Jirai claimed to have asked her grandmother Cit (FaMo) many times to tell myths, but she always refused saying she could not remember them. Jirai doubted this, and declared that Cit was just lazy (*malas*). While the elder people blamed the younger generation’s lack of interest, the young people blamed their elder relatives’ laziness. Personally, I believe the decline in myth telling is related to the many changes in Kuala Gandah which slowly detach the Chewong from their indigenous traditions.

It is possible that the tradition of myth telling was better kept in other families. Two young mothers, Rosnani and Mariam, told me that myths often were told in their (extended) families. Both the women resided periodically with their parents who lived in settlements inside the forest. This variation can be coincidental, but it might also point to a difference between the Chewong living in Kuala Gandah and those further inside the forest.

Another traditional feature that I had expected to witness during my fieldwork was the healing séances called *nöpoh*. However, these séances were hardly held anymore. The Christian missionaries had stated that it was wrong to engage in traditional rituals, and I was told that there was no *putao* (shaman) in the village anymore. However, I am aware that discussions about shamans are sensitive in some Orang Asli communities, for example among the Batek: “A shaman cannot run around showing off or boasting about his knowledge; nor can others freely identify his shamanistic status and discourse on his powers. Such open displays invite punishment or lead to a loss of efficacy” (Lye Tuck-Po 2005:25). Endicott writes about the same group “It has often been reported that Negrito shamans do not reveal themselves to outsiders, and the identities of the shamans can only be found out indirectly or after long acquaintance with a group” (Endicott 1979:131). This might

explain the reluctance among the Chewong to identify any living person as a *putao*. Only a few men inside the forest knew a little bit of the traditional knowledge, I was told. Gadung, residing a kilometre or so inside, was one of them. Gadung himself claimed that he did not have the skills needed. He had converted to Christianity, and seemed to be hesitant to pursue his shamanistic knowledge. The fact that the Chewong now have access to western medicine might also discourage traditional healing practices. This was confirmed by Deh, but she added that western medicine could not cure all illnesses. As an example, a person might lose her *ruwai* (soul or vital principle). If this happens a *putao* can go looking for it through a *nöpoh*. But these days, when no one performed the *nöpoh* anymore, the person might die, Deh explained.

When I compare today's situation with Howell's descriptions from the late 70s and early 80s, it seems clear that the importance attributed to the traditional cosmology is on decline. However, it is still invoked in phases connected with life and death. When a six-month-old baby died, she was buried the same day as is the tradition. During the burial, spells were uttered, and food was placed on the grave. The following week the whole settlement of Kuala Gandah was very frightened, explaining that ghosts (*hantu*) were around. On the afternoon of the sixth day, I was told that the baby's *yinlugen* (the aspect of a person which is activated upon death (Howell 1980) would transcend to another world. Because the baby's *yinlugen* felt lonely, it would like to bring along other people, and was therefore searching for their souls (*ruwai*). In order to escape being captured, a ritual (called *janji*) was performed in Kuala Gandah. Seven poles of bamboo were burned at the entrance of the village. They were burned in pairs, while the last single pole marked off the closure. When bamboo is burned it crackles with a loud noise. During the ritual I was in Deh and Mar's house, and when the first bang was heard Deh started to fence with a pile of rolled up leaves resembling a sword. As the ghosts have different eyes, and thus see the world differently, they perceived the leaves as a knife, and therefore escape in fear. Simultaneously, everyone in the house was chewing the tuber *bunglai*, which had a smell that frightened the ghost. When dusk came, Jirai burned an oil lamp under a bamboo dart container, generating carbon deposit on the container. The whole extended family which was present in the house touched the soot and made a mark next to their nose. Norana, Ruhil's Jah Hut wife, put the mark on the forehead of

herself and her children.²⁶ The rituals following the death clearly resembles the funerals of the past as described by Howell (1989a:149), showing no signs of Christian or Muslim elements as far as I could see.

I only got to see the *nöpoh* twice during my fieldwork. The first time it was arranged artificially because I had expressed my desire to see it. It was done in a settlement further into the forest, a place called Kampung Kalung. Here, I was surprised to find the adolescent daughters readily being drummers and chorus during the ritual. Obviously, they were not embarrassed and were familiar with the setting. On the other had, 13 years old Tiara, who came with me from Kuala Gandah, was very shy in the beginning. She told me that she had never witnessed a *nöpoh* before. The second time I saw something resembling a *nöpoh* was when a busload of Japanese tourists came to the village. The Chewong were offered RM 50 each if they performed a traditional ritual for entertainment. Five women accepted and did a short and incomplete performance. They were shy and seemed a bit uncomfortable, but RM 50 was too much money to turn down.

Are these observations signs of a disappearance of the traditional cosmology and the practices connected to it? Such questions received ambivalent answers by the Chewong. Some expressed fear that the Chewong language and culture would soon be exchanged with Malay and Malay practices. Others asserted that they did not forget the traditional knowledge, and that traditional beliefs could live alongside new religions. The children and youngsters' ignorance of the tradition was then explained by laziness and a lack of interest. But why this lack of interest? People insisted that conversion was done mainly of pragmatic considerations and did not influence them much. But the children are now growing up with regular religious education, and they are receiving new impulses by watching television and going to school. All these features are influencing the trajectory of change in the village, which seems to include a decline of indigenous traditions. A striking element in the process of change as regards religion and cosmology is the seemingly growing detachment from the previously important localities. The Chewong cosmology is based on their ancestors' localities in the forest. "There is a large body of myths which are well-known to all Chewong. They all contain some cosmological information, and they demonstrate the intimate entanglement of humans and forest" (Howell 1996). Contrastingly, the new

²⁶ This illustrates a similarity between Chewong and Jah Hut tradition which I noticed on several occasions. Normally, there were only slight differences in performance and meaning.

religions take as a departure point the writings of a holy book. Facts, rules, and guidelines for living all derive from these writings, and are carried forward to the Chewong as imposed formalities by outsiders. This is a far cry from the traditional cosmology which was embedded in everyday practices and localities.

6 Healthcare in transformation

In this chapter I will describe changes in the health systems in Kuala Gandah. Today's situation will be compared with Signe Howell's description from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Subsequently, the empirical data from Kuala Gandah will be seen in relation to the national development of the Orang Asli healthcare. The current political situation will be contrasted with reports of Orang Asli healthcare in the decades after Independence.

Traditional understandings of illness and cure

Based on data from her fieldwork in 1977-79, Howell (1989a) shows how disease was perceived by the Chewong to be caused by transgression of a rule or coincidental encounters with non-human beings. Some of these beings see the human soul (*ruwai*)²⁷ as food, equivalent to how humans look upon meat. If a superhuman being takes someone's soul, this person loses her/his equilibrium. Steps then need to be taken in order to restore the balance. This was the job of the *putao* (shaman), who could use spells, incantations or a full shamanistic séance (*nöpoh*). He (the *putao* was in most cases a man) was able to search for the lost soul as his special "cool" (*sedeig*) eyes enabled him to see superhuman beings that ordinary people could not see. The *putao* was also able to communicate with them, and could clear up misunderstandings which had caused them to take someone's soul.

A *nöpoh* was always conducted on behalf of the whole community (Howell 1989a). In addition to curing illness, such séances could also be used preventively. Good health and luck would be asked for all the people in the settlement, and also for Chewong living further away. The holistic character and the involvement of the whole community became clear to me when I witnessed a *nöpoh* in the small settlement of Kalung. Although the séance was arranged upon my request, in order to please my curiosity, a lot of work was put into the preparation. Young and old helped out in

²⁷ The Chewong use the word *ruwai* in three different meanings; vital principle, soul (i.e. consciousness), or a certain type of spirit-guide. These distinctions are Howell's analytical tools, and are not used by the Chewong themselves (Howell 1989).

plaiting leaves and making head ornaments. Some prepared musical instruments out of bamboo. During the actual séance, the elderly man Gupang acted as the *putao*. The women were chorus and made drumming music with bamboo poles. The cooperative character and unity expressed in the ritual corresponds to the way health and illness was perceived traditionally.

Although the Chewong have different words for body and mind, these qualities are “not separable into unconnected parts or qualities” (Howell 1996:133). Howell describes the many possible causes of illness, for example a sore, a broken leg, a lost soul, or inappropriate emotionality. However, symptoms are not informative in themselves (ibid). As an example, I met Tok as he was coming out of the forest to attend the regular Saturday ceremony in the church. He told me that he had been bitten by a snake on his way. His foot was swollen, but Tok said he was doing fine. He could also tell me that he knew the reason for the accident. Earlier the same day, he had craved for a cigarette, but he did not have any. The unfulfilled desire broke the rule of *punen*, and the repercussion was the snake bite. In other words, in the traditional health system mental and physical states are intimately connected, the same way as the individual is intimately connected to the environment. Because of this interconnectedness, Nicholas & Baer (2004) argues that traditional healers and their methods are unlikely to disappear easily from Orang Asli culture, because of the Orang Asli’s desire for healing to be integrated within their local socio-cultural context. However, new western medical systems challenge the understanding of interconnectedness, as they treat sickness as a purely physical and individual matter.

Common health problems in Kuala Gandah today

The infant mortality rate in the Chewong community has decreased. Howell (1989a) identified an approximate 50 per cent infant mortality rate, and although I do not have exact figures, the number seems to be much lower today. This might be due to child vaccinations given by the local clinic. Yet, many of the diseases identified by Howell are still prevalent. I am not trained in medicine, but my impression was that a majority of the health problems among the Chewong were easily curable and preventable, had the right measures been taken. However, as Baer (1999) points out, it is a problem for

the Orang Asli that poverty and malnutrition is not recognized as major health risks. In Kuala Gandah pneumonia is rather common, and according to Howell (personal communication) tuberculosis and malaria were relatively frequent in the past, and might very well be so today. However, I will focus here on the diseases which I observed.

Recurring fever was widespread in Kuala Gandah, especially among the children. Usually the fever was slight and cured itself quickly, at other times it was caused by more serious diseases. Equally common was it to have a cold, a cough, or a running nose. All the Chewong, both those from inside and the inhabitants in Kuala Gandah, agreed that the children in Kuala Gandah were much more prone to such illnesses than those inside the forest. Their explanation was the proximity to outsiders who often brought diseases with them. Their reasoning is valid, as contact with outsiders and changed environmental conditions can lead to the spread of infections, and settlements with higher population densities can sustain parasitical infections over a longer period (Chee 1995).

Various skin problems were common. Many of the children, and some adults, had small infectious wounds spread all over their body. When the wounds were inspected by doctors, no certain diagnosis or cause could be given. The wounds spread easily, but could be treated with antibacterial cream, although normally they were just ignored. At one occasion, I brought a couple with two small children to the doctor for a severe fungal infection affecting the whole family. The mother and the two-year-old son were in great pain, as the fungus had spread to large areas of their body. The little boy's penis and testicles had open wounds, but they had not dared to visit the local clinic on their own. Living inside the forest, they worried about communication problems and claimed that their Malay language was poor. Neither did they know that the local clinic gave free treatment.

Many of the Chewong suffered from intestinal worms. Mostly people were happy to take anti-worm cures if provided with it, but some of the children refused to because they did not stand the thought of the process of getting the worms out of the body. After taking medicine, the worms die inside the stomach, and then come out either through the nose or the mouth, or through the rectum. The worms could be up to 20 cm long.

Malnutrition was also a problem among some Chewong. A few of the smaller children were identified by health workers as being underweight. A couple of women

were anemic, and vitamin deficiency was common among the children, according to the health workers. This was likely caused by a poor diet, in some cases combined with diarrhea. Howell describes the Chewong nutrition as sufficient in the past, based on hunting and gathering supported by farming. She refers to a frequent claim by the Chewong: “We know how to dig and hunt, we will never die from a hungry stomach” (Howell 1989a:22). The poor diet today implies a change in this attitude. I do not believe the Chewong in Kuala Gandah have forgotten how to survive on forest produce, but I see tendencies for a decrease in the variety of animals and plants utilized as food sources. This is likely a result of an increased monetization and availability of purchased foodstuff, in combination with other socio-cultural changes which detach the Chewong from their indigenous practices. Several reports on the Orang Asli show that deep-forest communities are healthier than fringe-forest communities. These conclusions are generally based on diet quality and nutritional indicators (Chee 1995).

Utilization of traditional medicine today

Nöpoh

I was told there was no *putao* in Kuala Gandah anymore, and saw no spontaneously arranged *nöpoh*.²⁸ However, as mentioned above, a couple of men inside the forest were knowledgeable regarding spells, but they were said to be too lazy to go do the *nöpoh*. One of them was Gadung, living with his family in Kampung Pien, 15 minutes walk from Kuala Gandah. It was commented on Gadung’s laziness when his mother Cit was ill. Cit lived in Kampung Tuar, another hour’s walk from Gadung’s place. I was told that Gadung had not visited her for five months, even though he knew that she was old and sick. I was not able to tell whether this comment was uttered as a condemnation, or if it was simply a statement of fact. When Gadung finally did go to see her, he performed some minor spells, but not a proper *nöpoh*. Gadung himself claimed that he was far from being a *putao*; he only knew a little bit, not like people of the past.

²⁸ See the previous chapter for a discussion on *putao* and whether there are any among the Chewong today.

Jampi

Gadung had learned his skills from a Temuan²⁹. When it comes to healing rituals the Chewong often make use of the Temuans, who perform rituals which they call *jampi* (incantations). When Norya's two daughters became ill, Norya and her husband brought them to a Temuan in an adjacent settlement for help. The girls, the youngest being six months and the oldest about two years old, were suffering from fever, diarrhea and a light cough. After the *jampi*, the family adhered to a number of taboos, but after a few days the baby-girl died. Being unaware of the seriousness of the girls' illness, I was shocked to receive the sad news. The family was staying far inside the forest, and I had never met them before. However, upon receiving the sad message, I immediately joined others in Kuala Gandah to the Temuan settlement where the funeral was to take place the same day. As we arrived, I was taken into the room where the little baby was lying on the floor, wrapped in a sarong with an oil lamp burning next to her. She looked beautifully peaceful; only her pale skin color indicated that she was not sleeping. Her mother was sitting next to her. Her slightly red eyes revealed her grief. Being lost for words, I quietly sat down next to them. After a while, I asked Norya to see her other daughter. As the mother brought her, I got worried – the little girl was weak and dehydrated. In between her quiet cries, she asked for water (*tabn, tabn*), whereupon her mother gave her some sips of boiled water from a cup.

I was aware of the taboo saying they could not leave the settlement, but simultaneously I was anxious to bring the little girl to the local clinic. Feeling torn between my own confidence in western medicine and the learned respect for Chewong knowledge and traditions, I found the situation difficult. I interpreted Norya to be in a state of ambivalence as well, as she only responded vaguely on my suggestions to go to the clinic. I consulted the Temuan shaman who had conducted the ritual, and he allowed me to bring the family to the clinic if they themselves wanted to. Norya looked relieved, and after a while she stated the possibility of the baby-girl being saved as well – if I had only arrived one day earlier. However, she said we had to ask her husband's permission first, who at that time had gone inside the forest to inform and fetch the grandparents for the funeral. When he arrived a few

²⁹ The Temuan is another Orang Asli group. There are a few Temuan settlements close to Kuala Gandah, on the way to Bolok. Some Chewong men have married Temuan women and settled here.

hours later, the burial followed promptly. Afterwards, I approached him with the suggestion to go to the clinic. He immediately refused, telling me that his daughter would die if we brought her. His parents were of the same opinion, and Norya eventually agreed with them. I was told that the ritual that had been performed was unusual “strong” (*jampi kuat*), and that it was of outmost importance to observe the taboo rules. However, some villagers asserted that the fear of strangers and worries regarding hospitalization was the main cause of their unwillingness. I offered to bring them to the clinic, come along to the hospital if necessary, and of course to pay all expenses. But there was no room for negotiation, and to be honest, I myself was troubled by the thought of breaking the taboos in which they believed so strongly.

Finally, I suggested calling an ambulance, and with the promise that the nurses would only provide medicine and not bring the girl out of the settlement, I was allowed to do so. Relieved, I hurried to the nearest point with a cell phone line and called the clinic. Luckily they understood the gravity of the situation, and on my description of the girl’s condition they decided to bring antibiotics etc. I had to wait at the spot for the ambulance in order to guide them to the settlement which was not reachable by car. It took an hour’s time from I left until I returned with the nurses. But, when we arrived at the settlement the family had returned to their hamlet deep inside the forest, bringing the sick girl with them. I was shattered. I worried not only for the girl’s condition, but also what would happen if she died. After all, they did break the rule confining them to the house where the ritual was performed. Surely, I thought, if the girl would die now, it would be my fault, as I had put pressure on the parents. But Jirai comforted me, explaining that it had been the plan from the very beginning to bring the sick girl back into the forest after the funeral. The grandparents had made the decision when they were informed of the baby’s death. When confronted with the taboo rule, they had argued that if the girl died, she would at least die with her family, in a place where she belonged. Their decision was condemned by some of the other Chewong. Jirai’s brother, Sulaiman, called the act stupid (*bodoh*). Feeling powerless, the only thing I could do was to give the antibiotics which the nurses had brought to the grandfather, who was to return to the forest a little later. I instructed him on how to give the medicine, and he promised to do so. If he in fact did, I do not know. I had to leave the village a week later, without knowing the girl’s

condition. Luckily, I have recently received news³⁰ that she has recovered and is doing fine.

Medicines from the forest

“Minor” ailments such as skin problems, slight fever or diarrhea would not traditionally trigger healing ceremonies (Howell 1989a), but if these were seen to be a result of interference by non-human beings, spells could be used. Spells were used as a medium for contacting such beings, and it was the correct utterance of the spell, rather than its meaning, that was important. The spells were uttered in a whispering semi-laudable voice, and nobody should overhear it (Howell 1986). This might explain why I never witnessed anyone performing a spell, although – seen in relation to the other changes regarding health and disease – I suspect a decline in the use of spells as well. However, I did see forest products being utilized to deal with minor sicknesses. Such forms of remedies enforce the link between the environment and health. The source of sickness, i.e. environmental disequilibrium, is also the place where remedies are found. Gadung once explained to me the difference between sorts of illnesses. Some illnesses came from the outside, he said, and could not be cured by traditional means. In such cases western medicine should be utilized. As an example he pointed to malaria. Other diseases had to be treated traditionally. When the little baby-girl died in December, after receiving *jampi* which did not work, Gadung stated that maybe the illness came from the outside. The distinction between different causes of illness did not seem to be clear cut.

Medicines from the forest were only occasionally utilized in Kuala Gandah during my stay. When I suffered from a long lasting diarrhea, Deh went into the forest to gather roots of different spices³¹. She mixed them with boiling water and made me drink it in portions throughout the day, and the next day I felt much better. Deh was certain that my problem was due to unhygienic conditions at a restaurant, but explained that her mixture could also be used to treat *chikah*³², the strong stomach pain resulting from a breach of the taboo regarding mixture of certain foodstuff, for

³⁰ Letter from Noni, May 2006.

³¹ She called the roots *penang og ubat kerabo*

³² Howell (1989a) spells it “tika”, but Noni told me this was wrong, and spelled it for me as “chikah”. This spelling and pronunciation is closer to the Malay word *cika*, which means “colic”.

example meat and fruits. If this rule is broken, some superhuman being (*bas*) will enter the stomach and claw away at it until the person dies (Howell 1989a). *Chikah*, Deh continued, could not be cured by medicine from the shop (*ubat kedai*). Deh's statement is in line with Gadung's thesis regarding different sources of illnesses. Deh was familiar with a number of natural medicine plants, and when we were walking in the forest she could point out anything from coughing medicine to a plant inducing abortion. It is worth noting that her knowledge extended far beyond the current use of plants for medication, implying a decrease in utilization.

In Kuala Gandah today, traditional remedies are increasingly supplemented or even replaced by western medicine. Different behavioral patterns between generations can often illuminate emerging changes. Miah is a young mother in her early twenties. One day she told me that her three-year-old daughter was weak and did not eat properly. She asked me for vitamin pills. In contrast, Deh had also noticed that Miah's daughter was frequently ill, and therefore gave Miah some leaves and instructed her on how to mix it in the bathing water of the girl. Deh told me that she always used to bath her children in such water to keep them healthy. She tried to teach the younger generation about the use of traditional plants and herbs, but they were too lazy to learn (*malas belajar*), she complained. Although Miah's origin from a Jah Hut village might be the cause of her different response, I found her behavior to be rather common among the young. Different responses to illnesses indicate discrepancies in perceptions of healthcare across the generations, and are a sign of changing frames of understanding. Related to health and illness, these changes include new understandings of the connection between the individual body and spirit, and its surroundings. Miah's request for vitamin pills revealed an understanding of her daughter's weakness as individual and separated from environmental³³ concerns. Deh's solution, on the contrary, reinforced the little girl's connection with the forest, localities and tradition.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the traditional Chewong cosmology was still central in certain life changing events, despite a general decline in its importance. Likewise, forest medicines were still utilized during such events, for example by Manja after her delivery. In Manja's case, the delivery was done traditionally in her house in Kuala Gandah. The umbilical cord was cut by a sharpened bamboo, as the

³³ By "environmental" I refer not only to the physical environment, but to a milieu in which health is conditioned by equilibrium in natural-, human- and superhuman relations.

pantang (taboo) rule required. The placenta was wrapped in an old piece of cloth and placed in the branches of a tree across the river. Howell writes that the placenta is referred to as the baby's "older sibling". The ghost of the "older sibling" goes to another world where it waits to be reunited with its younger sibling upon his death (Howell 1989a:147). In addition to adhering to various taboo-rules, Manja also used leaves and plant extracts gathered by her husband as pain killers. The leaves were heated close to the hearth before she placed them on her stomach. Besides she drank extracts from roots mixed with water. This was all done to ensure fast and healthy recovery as well as easing the pains. The use of medicine from the forest instead of purchased pain killers, which were available, corresponds to Howells observation that only traditional auxiliaries from the forest were used during deliveries³⁴ (ibid:53). In such liminal phases of life, it becomes especially clear how the individual is intrinsically linked to her environment, including the different worlds of superhumans. The hypothesis is strengthened by the observation of the rituals following the death of the baby-girl, as described above. So, although the use of traditional medicines and rituals has decreased, they were still brought into play in situations related to life and death.

Western medicine and the local clinic

The medical clinic in Lanchang is run by the Health Department. This clinic also administers a small branch in Bolok, where they do vaccinations and distribute medicine for simple problems such as fevers or colds. Only nurses are situated in Bolok. For more serious illnesses one has to see a doctor in Lanchang. The clinic in Lanchang is supposed to carry out periodic visits to Kuala Gandah. However, when I first started to live there I was told that the health workers had not shown up for a long period. At that time a widespread epidemic disease of conjunctivitis (red, swollen and sore eyes) had occurred. Nobody wanted to go to the clinic to get medicine; they said the pain would pass by itself after some days. However, it continued to spread, and some even contracted the bacteria for the second time. I therefore went to Lanchang to inform the clinic and ask for medicines to distribute. My request was taken

³⁴ For example the use of sharpened bamboo to cut the umbilical cord (no metal knife), and a bamboo receptacle containing washing water (no plastic bowl).

seriously and a few nurses were immediately sent to the village. The nurses soon realized that the case required doctors and a comprehensive survey of the general health situation in the village, which they found discouraging. A “mobile clinic” was sent the day after, with a doctor and health workers. The doctor and nurses went from door to door, monitoring each family and distributing medicine. Water samples were taken from the river to investigate possible water contamination. During the visit the doctor identified two children who had such a high fever that they had to be admitted to hospital. It turned out later that they had pneumonia. It is highly unlikely that the parents would have brought them to the clinic on their own initiative. The Chewong are in general extremely reluctant to go to the clinic. They claim to be shy, lazy and afraid. The fear of being hospitalized, taken away from their friends and families, is perhaps the most significant. When a mother is admitted or accompanies a sick child, the problem emerges of who should take care of the other children (especially those still breastfed). Fear of economic costs is also discouraging people to contact the clinic, in spite of the law stating that Orang Asli healthcare is free. Worries regarding transportation back home are daunting. In addition, the people inside the forest, with a lack of confidence in their Malay, point to language problems.

After the incidence of the eye-epidemic, nurses from Lanchang started to come to Kuala Gandah more often. For a while they came at least once a week to follow up on the epidemic. The recurring visits had positive ramifications. The first time they came during my stay, Manja grabbed her youngest children and fled into the forest. She refused to meet the nurses in spite of her 9-year-old boy having high fever for a few days already. Conversely, at the end of my stay, I observed Manja approach the nurses at her own initiative to ask for medicines. And when she was due for delivery and the labour got complicated, she asked me to call an ambulance! (Which, however, never made it in time, but the baby was luckily born healthy). These were major steps taken by a shy woman who previously was very fearful regarding interaction with outsiders. The example illuminates how fast some developments can come about given the right conditions. It is not to say, however, that the Chewong now trust or have confidence in western medicine and the clinic. For that to happen there are still obstacles to fight.



Several women were helping out during Manja's delivery, but her husband was the main "midwife" as is tradition among the Chewong.



Visiting nurses during the conjunctivitis-epidemic in Kuala Gandah.

Challenges regarding new health systems

The Chewong have traditionally been fearful of outsiders, and this is probably one of the reasons as to why they are slow in utilizing the medical facilities in Bolok or Lanchang. Nevertheless, I believe some of their worries could have been avoided if information was provided in understandable forms, and if adjustments such as possibilities to bring along family members were made. The Chewong express great fear of being hospitalized. They worry about being in an unfamiliar environment all alone, how to get food, how to get transport back home etc. In theory, all of this should have been cared for. However, the Chewong have experienced that this is not always so.

Food is provided for the person admitted only. Any accompanying parent has to buy food. Needless to say, this poses a problem for the poor. Extra beds are not made available for accompanying parents or other relatives. I once brought a 9-year-old girl to the hospital. We had to share her small children-sized bed; such was the procedure. Mothers who still breastfeed younger children are therefore discouraged to go with a sick child to hospital, as neither beds or food are offered.

When Orang Asli are admitted to hospital, the JHEOA is supposed to arrange free transport back to their village – a helpful arrangement but not without faults. Frequently, the JHEOA personnel are busy and cannot come the specified day. On weekends and public holidays the service does not operate. When Ruhil's wife Norana gave birth at the hospital in Temerloh, Deh and I went to visit her. Norana and the newborn baby were fine, and ready to leave the ward. However, it was the 1st of May, and the JHEOA office was closed. Norana was told they could not arrange transport until two days later. It was a difficult situation, as the hospital wanted to discharge her. Norana also longed to go home. At that time the family resided in Norana's village in the Kuala Krau area, about an hour's drive from the hospital. As I was there, I offered to pay for a taxi. It is not easy to tell how the problem would have been solved in another case.

Money is a crucial and recurrent problem for the Chewong. Officially, Orang Asli healthcare is free of charge. However, the story about Aquila (Padu) can explain why the Chewong cannot trust this. Aquila is about 1,5 years old and blind. The blindness is due to cataract, which can easily be operated. After a long process of persuasion, the parents agreed to have her operated. Weeks before the operation was

to take place, the family was sent to Kuala Lumpur to have the girl's heart checked. But in spite of the heart being strong enough, the operation had to be postponed several times due to Aquila's generally weak health. After several "wasted trips", from the parents' point of view, they changed their minds and fled into the forest when the ambulance once again came to pick them up. When I left the village in July, Aquila was still not operated and the situation was unclear. However, I have been informed after my return to Norway that a few months later Aquila's parents received two bills. One was from the hospital in Kuantan, and was only for RM 6,50. The other was RM 310 from the National Heart Institute in Kuala Lumpur. It turned out that the clinic in Lanchang had sent them to an institute which does not come under the government's free healthcare policy. This bill constituted a significant amount of money for the poor family, who naturally were very upset. Luckily, the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns was informed and they conveyed the situation to the Director-General of JHEOA for his action. But Aquila is still blind.

Registration and Regulation

The state's requirement of identity documents poses another problem for the Chewong. The birth of a baby should immediately be registered by official health personnel. The *father* then has to travel to the town of Temerloh to have the baby registered at the District Registration Office and get a birth certificate. This has to be done within *five* days after delivery in order to get the certificate for free. For delayed registrations there are small fines. However, if the delay is over two months serious problems arise. Mizah gave birth in her house in Kampung Senel, a village about four hours walk inside the forest. As is the tradition among the Chewong, her husband acted as midwife. After four months the family moved to Kuala Gandah. Mizah then told me that neither of her three children had birth certificates, and asked me to help her register her newborn girl in Temerloh. This was not an easy task. I brought the mother and the baby to Temerloh, only to be told that the father was needed in order to register her. In addition they had to prove that the baby was really theirs, as it was already four months old and they did not have any documentation from health personnel. This required interviews of the whole family, including the father's parents. We were also told to bring a confirmation letter from the village head (*batin*)

(posing yet another problem as Batin Bak is illiterate), and pictures of the whole family. Back in Kuala Gandah we tried to arrange all this, and after a few weeks we returned to Temerloh bringing the whole extended family. After hours in the Registration Office we were told to go home and wait for information on when to return next time. It turned out that the papers had to be sent to the state capital of Kuantan for processing, and when this was settled the family would be called to return for an interview by a court official. The cost would be RM 60, excluding the RM 100 in taxi charges. An additional problem for the illiterate couple was all the paperwork. When my fieldwork was over, they had not been asked to return, and I had to leave the situation unsolved. I provided the family with sufficient cash for future procedures, but did not expect them to go through with it, as the previous visits were discouraging. The situation at the registration office corresponds surprisingly well to Sarah Lund's "ethnography of identity papers" from Peru's southern highlands:

[H]ierarchical relationships are evident within the registrar's office, delineating, separating and in certain cases even demeaning the applicants. The subordinate position of the applicant in relation to the attendant is an obvious distinction... The majority of the applicants show deference when presenting their papers. Can something be found to be at fault? Will the bureaucrats demand a fine because of the deadline? (Lund 2001:11)

Seen in connection with forced resettlement in centralised towns, Lund argues that such procedures represent state power and is a vehicle for the bodily participation and familiarisation of the subject with state bureaucracies. In colonial Peru, these measures were taken "in order to civilise, enlighten and ultimately control" the indigenous population (ibid:20). It is clear that the procedures represent state power and promote subordination among the Chewong, who experience a lack of abilities to deal with the situation. The costly and complicated procedures dishearten the Chewong to the extent of non-appearance. As a result, most of the children are without identification papers. This is likely to bring them future problems, first and foremost when they are to register for school. Adults also lack ID cards, as the Chewong are not always aware of the official requirements, and therefore fail to act accordingly. Within the year of 2005 all Malaysian citizens were to renew their ID cards. Failure to do so before the card expired, or at latest within this year, would be punished with a fine. One Chewong man went to Temerloh to collect his new card.

Once there, he was told that his card had already expired, and a fine was demanded. Being unaware the deadline, he refused to pay and had to leave the office without his card.

The Chewong are not facing the problem of identification papers alone. The Malaysian Human Rights organisation Suhakam has reported that 4000 Orang Asli in the state of Pahang live without any form of identification (The Star 31.05.05).

Political health

Even though the general health situation in Kuala Gandah has improved, it is still far from adequate in my opinion. The Chewong shyness and fearfulness can partly explain why the available resources are not utilized. However, this is only one of the reasons for a poor healthcare. The clinic in Lanchang does not have the resources to deal with the Orang Asli in the area. Their periodic outreach seems to be relatively irregular and coincidental. I claim so on the basis of several statements from the Chewong. For example, one woman told me that the frequent visits after the conjunctivitis epidemic were a result of my presence. “When you are not here they don’t bother to come”, she said. However, some of the nurses and doctors showed a genuine concern for the Chewong and their situation. This might point to structural and political inadequacies rather than a lack of will from the staff.

By comparing Dr Bolton’s writings on Orang Asli healthcare in the decades after independence with the situation today, a rather gloomy development becomes apparent. When the Department of Aborigines (JOA, the forerunner of JHEOA) was established in 1957, a special hospital was built for the Orang Asli. Its first medical director was Dr. J. Malcolm Bolton (Nicholas & Baer 2004). Two features are especially noticeable concerning the medical service built up by Bolton and his crew; i) its family-centred hospital treatment, and ii) its involvement and training of Orang Asli health staff.

The hospital in Gombak was organized so it could accommodate the patient’s relatives. The whole family was admitted, and went through full medical examination and received lectures on hygiene and prevention of disease. Bolton (1973b:70) argues that “the additional cost of admitting relatives to hospital with the patients is justified by the advantage provided for health education and community disease control in the

family units”. Additionally, the company provided by relatives eased the stress of being taken away from village and its familiar surroundings, and thereby decreased social problems related to illness.

“In improving the health of the Orang Asli, measures in disease control, improvement of environmental sanitation, and health education are of primary importance” (Bolton 1973b). With this important understanding in mind, Dr Bolton’s team set out to educate and train indigenous “medicine men” in western medicine in 1957. Equipped with new knowledge and medicines they were then sent back to their village. Although not flawless, most importantly the process of “involvement and communication had been started” (Bolton 1973a). By time, the training expanded, and in 1973; 90 per cent of the 239 medical auxiliaries were Orang Asli trained at Gombak Hospital. The Orang Asli staff was working both at the hospital and at inland medical posts situated in interior villages. The medical program was built up from below, and Dr Bolton attributed the success of the service to the involvement of the Orang Asli themselves (Bolton 1968).

However, these promising developments were not to last. Nicholas and Baer (2004:6) point to a “gradual slackening in the medical and health care of the Orang Asli” since the 1980s. Contrary to the aims of the medical service in the 1970s, they show how there has been no recruitment of Orang Asli paramedics or health providers since the early 90s. Dr. Bolton’s success recipe with involvement of the Orang Asli seems to have been forgotten.

The JHEOA currently administer the hospital in Gombak, as well as treatment centres, transit centres and health clinics. The JHEOA provide services to the interior villages, while the Ministry of Health covers the areas more easily accessible (Nicholas & Baer 2004). While the hospital in Gombak still allows for families to accompany the patients at the ward, this is not the case at other governmental hospital. The results are fear and reluctance to be admitted, as shown by the Chewong examples.

Bolton also stressed the importance of training and information to be given in a form that was understandable and appropriate to the patient’s cultural background. These requirements seem to be forgotten today. For example, one of the young girls in Kuala Gandah was taken to the hospital for some blood samples. She came back to the village with a bag full of medicines, which she was told to take for five months before returning for a new check. She did not know what the medicines were for, or

why she had to take them. Consequently, when I visited the village again in December, seven months after she started the medication, she had not gone back for a recheck, although she had finished the prescribed medicines.

Dr. Bolton contrasts his team's achievements with the medical service in America; "it is suggested that American Indians living in reservations in the United States would be more ambitious and self-reliant if they were more involved in their own welfare" (Bolton 1973a:1125). Perhaps the Orang Asli would have been more ambitious and self-reliant if the processes started in 1957 had been continued and further developed? As Baer writes "The success of health programs for the Orang Asli ultimately depends on the community itself – since it knows its own needs, problems, and priorities best. Community participation in primary health care not only promotes self-reliance and self determination, but is frequently cost effective as well" (Baer 1999:121)

7 Concluding discussion

In the forgoing chapters I have described various socio-cultural changes that have taken place in the Chewong society since the late 1970s. It is now time to revisit the initial research questions in order to tie up the ethnographic details.

Fields of interface

I have identified four main areas of change in the Chewong society, and these relate to education, economy, religion and healthcare. Each sphere of change can be seen as an interface; “a point of intersection or linkage between different social systems, fields or levels of social order, where structural discontinuities, based upon differences of normative value and social interest, are most likely to be found” (Long 1989:2). The intersections between the Chewong and the outside social system typically take place in Kuala Gandah, which thus emerges as a spatial point of interface. As Long writes, fields of interface entail inequalities of power. I have tried to illuminate these power inequalities in my description of the above mentioned areas of change. The historical and political overview should have made clear how structural power creates a framework within which the Chewong interact with outsiders. The framework is characterized by the government’s lack of recognition of the Orang Asli as the real indigenous peoples of Malaysia, and the subsequent failure to acknowledge their rights to land and cultural identity. As pointed out by Nicholas (2000), present day domination of the Orang Asli is related to a contest for resources. In their race for economic development, the government employs assimilation strategies through which it is hoped that the Orang Asli will lose their indigenous cultural identities and their close connections to land and localities, making it easier to appropriate the land for use by others. Although the Chewong have been lucky to retain a fair part of their ancestral land, their lives are still constrained by this structural power shaping the relations between the Malays and the Orang Asli. One of the significant tenets in this relation reads: if the Orang Asli become Malays, the Malays’ claim to indigenous status will be legitimized and unchallenged. I have shown how the changes in Kuala Gandah, to a certain degree, follow a pattern of socio-cultural detachment from the

forest and localities therein – changes which are in line with the government’s aim for assimilation. Hence, external forces are clearly vital in shaping the course of change in the Chewong society.

Within the structural framework of unequal power relations, interpersonal power comes to the forth. However, as Knaft (2002:237) argues, “agents of modern institutional change need not be personally exploitative or malicious; they can have de facto superiority and dominance in an economic and structural or ideological sense”. This ideological superiority held by the dominant groups is closely connected to the recognitional domination of the Orang Asli, and finds diverse expressions in different circumstances. What I find the most conspicuous lack of recognition – if not the most influential – is the decision to give the Chewong in Kuala Gandah new Malay names. This instance is a typical example of Knaft’s argument as related above. The teacher who “helped” to find new names to the villagers is generally kind and helpful, but she is acting within a framework of superiority and dominance and her help tends to be paternalistic, leaving the Chewong subordinated and dependent.

The question of agency

Having identified the main areas of change and the external forces impacting on these changes; the question of Chewong agency remains. In Kuala Gandah, outside influence is material, economic, social and cultural, but very few of the changes are a result of direct coercion, save for the initial encroachment into the area by the Malays. The request by the JHEOA to move to Kuala Gandah was perceived as compulsion (*paksa*) by many Chewong, but some families nevertheless refused to move. At a later stage, other families have also chosen to return to the forest. However, many continue to live in Kuala Gandah, and the population of the village is currently increasing. It is intriguing to examine why so many of the Chewong seem to willingly reduce their autonomy by settling in Kuala Gandah and become dependent on and subordinated to outside agents. Knaft (2002) has analyzed a similar situation among the Gebusi of the lowland Papua New Guinea, and proposes some interesting theories. Knaft argues that the Gebusi’s fascination of modernity and their desire for Western-style goods and commodities plays a significant part in the processes of change in their society. However, there is a clear disjuncture between the present conditions and

future expectations, and this disjuncture informs the Gebusi's willingness to submit themselves to institutions and agents associated with a larger world. The Gebusi lack the means to satisfy their aspirations – their desire to pursue a “modern” lifestyle is blocked by lack of money, education, and access – and the agents and institutions that *are* associated with a wider world therefore attain special status.

Hence, it is ... not surprising that people in conditions of economic marginality may contextually submit themselves to the authority of one or another institution that they associate with the benefits of a larger world. Juxtaposed against the higher status and wealth claimed by educated persons or outsiders, local people can become relatively passive or subordinate when they attempt to associate with or learn from modern institutions – such as schools, churches, government ... (Knaft 2002:7)

These processes entail submissiveness and passivity in those contexts that are most modern and most controlled by outsiders, a dynamic which Knaft calls *recessive agency*; “willingly pursued actions that put actors in a position of subordination, passivity, and patient waiting for the influence or enlightenment of external authority figures” (ibid:40). Among the Chewong, I have shown that such patterns can be detected in the processes of conversion and in situations related to healthcare and schooling. The submissive position taken in front of dominant outsiders is likely enhanced by the historical conditions of slavery and the cultural value of fear and shyness. Hence, cultural factors allow changes to take place without much discussion. Together with the Chewong's fascination of a modern life, these internal factors to a certain degree encourage and sustain the changes initially introduced by outside agents. For example, it would not have been possible for the Christian missionaries to gather up to eight families in their Saturday ceremonies if the Chewong had refused their teachings or ejected them from the village. In contrast, trade relations show a different pattern. The Chewong are more active in such situations, and even argue on a price from time to time. Their backstage condemnation of cheating middlemen is far from passive, and some middlemen are clearly preferred over others. The reason for this discrepancy in reaction can be attributed to the Chewong's long experience with trade. Although dependency on money has increased, trade is not a new phenomenon among the Chewong, and neither is the feeling of being cheated.

In other words, it is crucial to point to the contextual aspect of the submissiveness. The Chewong show tendencies of recessive agency in fields of

interface – in situations introduced by outsiders – but they remain autonomous in settings related to the forest and their traditions.

The path ahead

After a process of deforestation and outside encroachment in which the Chewong were totally powerless, some of them now willingly engage in introduced “developments”. Some of these changes have the potential of positive repercussions for the individual, but they often intertwine with a decrease in indigenous knowledge. The trajectory of change includes a gradual detachment from central forest localities. Social life and cultural identity was previously built around the local environment, as the forest provided sources of food, knowledge, identity and world view. Today, most of these demands can be met by outside institutions, at the sacrifice of cultural identity. Hence, some of the Chewong seem to slowly move away from autonomous lives embedded in a culturally significant environment – into a larger society which treats them as subordinates and creates passive and dependent individuals. These qualities of interaction leave the Chewong vulnerable for further assimilation and exploitation.

Significantly, Kuala Gandah is currently larger than ever, but the settlement pattern and the changes it entails are not irreversible, as stated by Howell (2003). People are moving back and forth in periodic waves of withdrawal. The acts of withdrawal contribute to a continuity of indigenous traditions, but they do not stop the developments. When Deh’s family moved inside the forest, the two teenage girls kept returning to Kuala Gandah in the afternoons to watch television. On Saturday nights, the whole family returned to go to church.

This phenomenon is perhaps aptly encapsulated by Jirai when she remarked, “sometimes I like to be modern, at other times I prefer tradition.”

My hope for the future is that Jirai and the rest of the Chewong can continue to choose a life which they value, and that their utilization of new opportunities does not require a renunciation of cultural identity. For this to happen, the Chewong must grow aware of how the changes affect their society, identity, status and their relations to other ethnic groups in Malaysia. Only awareness and a subsequent rejection of their

submissive stance in dealings with outsiders can help them gain their rights. Only then can they personally plot the course of the path ahead.

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APPENDIX 1: Sensitive issues

EXPLANATORY NOTES ON SENSITIVE ISSUES

Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia

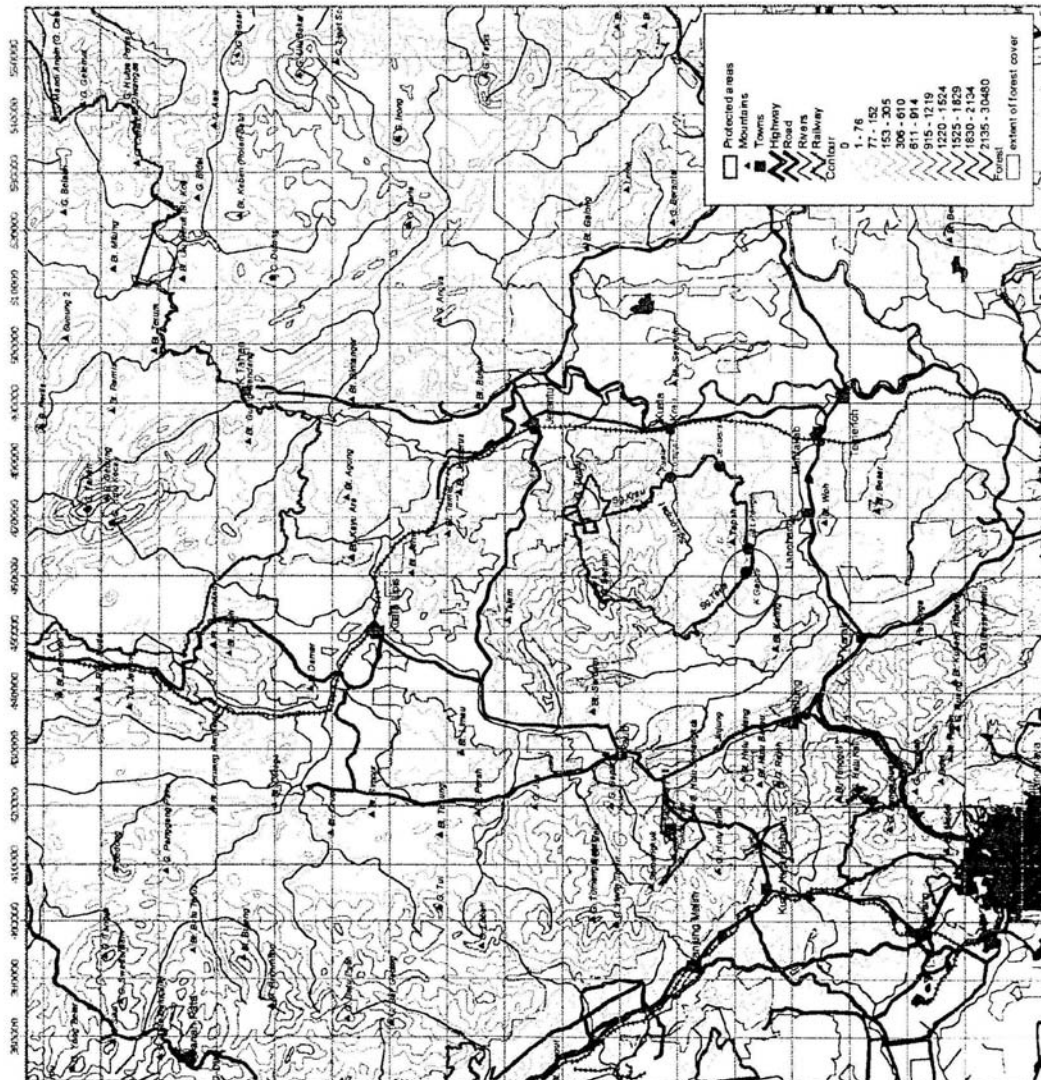
1. In the context of national security, sensitive issues mean any issue that can cause prejudice, hatred, enmity or contempt between or towards any ethnic or religious group and can affect public safety, national security and/or the integrity of the Government and is generally connected with the following acts or behaviour:
 - 1.1 Questioning the implementation of certain government policies pertaining to economic development, education and social matters.
 - 1.2 Questioning the implementation of particular provisions in the Federal and State Constitutions pertaining to Federal Laws, the freedom of religion, the special position of the indigenous community (Bumiputera), citizenship and rights of the other communities.
 - 1.3 Regarding a racial or religious group as neglected or given preference in the implementation of a particular policy without providing the background or reasons that necessitate it.
 - 1.4 Promoting the success of one racial or religious group on the basis of the preference and facilities provided by the government to individuals or the ethnic group concerned.
 - 1.5 Questioning the authority, wisdom and abilities of a group in a particular area on an ethnic basis.
 - 1.6 Associating and blaming a racial or religious group as the cause of an incident.
 - 1.7 Publicising the name or the ethnic group involved.
 - 1.8 Publicising the details of an incident or violent happening that can arouse anger amongst those who read and/or hear about it.
 - 1.9 Publicising and displaying of photograph or sketch that shows the racial origin or religion of the parties involved in causing the incident.
 - 1.10 Conveying the impression that the authorities have failed or are unable to control the situation and are rude and unjust in the discharge of their duties.

1.11 Exaggerating an incident or using rumours or information as the basis for reports that can cause panic or apprehension amongst the people.

1.12 Exaggerating the weakness of the government to particular groups overseas with the intention of demeaning the integrity or eroding the confidence of the international community in the authority of the government.

APPENDIX 2: Regional map

(Map 4)



(Source: Krau Wildlife Reserve Management Plan 2002-2006, annex 5)