

**A Muslim Seletar family in Malaysia: Negotiating a liminal religious and ethnic identity**

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## **A Muslim Seletar family in Malaysia: Negotiating a liminal religious and ethnic identity**

### **Abstract**

This article is drawn from ethnographic research undertaken in Johor state in Malaysia, referring also to related historical, theoretical and anthropological literature. I make some key observations about the modern practices and identity of a group of Muslims in Malaysia who can be seen to form a particular subset of their *Seletar* ethnic group. This is discussed in the context of the ongoing debate and contestation of Muslim / Malay and *bumiputera* identity and status. The article examines how these Muslim *Orang Asli* appear to negotiate their Muslim identity in relation to their *Seletar* identity and how they still subscribe to being *Seletar* in terms of language and specific aspects of culture which remain important to them. The re-research draws conclusions about how their agency in their chosen hybridity of cultural practice and religion provides a kind of emblematic model highlighting the potential multiplicity in Malaysian *bumiputera* indigeneity (or Malayness).

### **Keywords**

**Orang asli, seletar, identity, Islam, dakwah, malayness, ethnicity, bumiputera, indigeneity, cultural hybridity**

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## **Introduction**

This is a small case study which was researched using an ethnographic approach making use of observation, cultural participation, discussion, and questioning using the Malay language. The study focused on Muslims who were part of the *Seletar* ethnic group and who lived in or considered themselves part of the village community of *Kampong Simpang Arang* in Johor State in Malaysia. The research participants were drawn from one family in particular of mixed ethnic origin. The key research questions include:

- How close was this ‘indigenous’ Muslim group to the Malays in actuality?
- How close did they see themselves to the Malays?
- To what extent did they see themselves as *Orang Asli* or more specifically *Seletar*?
- How did the findings fit with current thinking regarding Malaysian ethnic/religious identity?

This study utilised theoretical views on identity drawing on recent literature on Malay and *Orang Asli* in particular, focusing on the anomalies underlying notions of Islamic identity in a Malaysian context. The study investigated the complexity of hybridity which underlies certain terms like *Orang Asli* and *Orang Seletar*. The findings indicated how notions which conflate Muslim and *Melayu* are misleading when superficial assumptions of similarity are questioned and deconstructed.

## **Background**

The family which I have focused on were initially presented to me as ‘*Orang Asli*’ (generic / formal Malaysian term for indigenous people) by my Johorian Malay contact (Participant B). This appeared to have some pejorative connotations in the way it was presented and was injected with a certain amount of anxiety due to the fact that a female ‘Malay’ family member had decided to marry a member of the *Orang Asli*, so from the very start there was a process of othering which was underway despite the Muslim heritage of the ‘*Seletar*’ family concerned and the putative *Orang Asli* heritage of the Malay family. I heard some accounts of visits by the members of the groom’s family to visit the new in-laws which had been tense and that there was an awkwardness on both sides which had been presented by the apparent

economic and perceived ethnic differences which existed. However, there was also another layer of apparent superstition (and fear) around the alleged traditional *Orang Asli* traditional practices of magic (This is mentioned by Ali (2002, 289) and explained by Peletz (1993,151-152) regarding *ilmu* (magical knowledge) as being perceived as having nefarious purposes). Through my Malay contacts I arranged to meet the *Orang Seletar* community and to make two visits to them at *Kampong Simpang Arang* (*charcoal road-bend village*). One visit was during the Eid festival and the second was to interview the family and to join them for a fishing/gathering trip in the *bakau* (Mangrove) estuaries. In addition, I interviewed a member of the family who was living in Johor Bahru and a member of the Malay family.

The *Kampong Simpang Arang* was established in the 1960s as part of what appears to be a government settlement scheme for nomadic peoples. People from quite a wide area of coastal Johor have been moved to the *kampong*. There are now about 600 people living there, but even now there is an extended community who still partially live the semi-nomadic riverine lifestyle. The settlement area which includes farmland is around 160 hectares and includes the fast flowing river and jetty which provides a transport link to the river systems which still provide the livelihood and lifestyle for many of the community. The river is not affected by any pollution or industry according to (Participant A), although it is quite possible that the fairly extensive *Kelapa Sawit* (oil palm) plantations surrounding the long road to get to the settlement could produce quite a few poisons and sprays which might work their way into the river systems. There used to be a lot of crocodiles, but I was told that these are few now and children are less frightened to swim in the river as I witnessed on my visit to the village jetty.

Some houses still used timber constructions and *atap* (palm leaf roofing) and there was a combination of concrete buildings, traditionally constructed 'temporary' structures and more standard government issue wooden raised houses like those to be found originally in Malay agricultural settlement (Felda) areas. In addition there were some newer housing which were sponsored by Malaysian corporations. The home of the family I visited superficially seemed more like modern Malay homes I had seen and was built in concrete somewhat further from

the water than the homes of the more 'traditional' members of the community with some curious concrete branch and tree trunk models incorporated into the outer retaining wall. These seemed to be a meaningful visual motif redolent of a receding coastal jungle lifestyle.

## **Methods**

The methods employed in researching this article have been ethnographic with longer term engagement, observation and discussion with Malay community members with connections to the *Seletar* community and then shorter visits and discussions with members of the community living in their designated settlement of *Kampung Simpang Arang* and in the urban environment of Johor Bahru in the South of Malaysia. It is important to stress that rather than seeking to fully understand *Seletar* identity construction in its broader sense, this article focuses particularly on the interface of *Seletar* Muslim identity with notions of *Malayness* and its phenomenological manifestations. Nevertheless, in doing this, it does seek to provide some context to this focus, both in relation to ideas and debates about Malay identity and the circumstances and heterogeneity of the *Seletar* society at large. In respect to this the work of Mariam Ali (2002) across the modern border in Singapore has been especially helpful in providing comparison, contrast and sometimes confirmation of my own more recent observations of this ethnic group in Malaysia.

I was guided round the main *Seletar* settlement by Muslim participants and was offered the opportunity to go on a 'fishing' trip by the family I was researching. This afforded me the opportunity to have an extended conversation in Malay with my research participants as well as observe, participate in and discuss in detail this key occupational and cultural activity for the *Seletar* and which was clearly a unifying marker of identity for them.

My research revolved around informal interviews and discussions with family members often over food. Several visits to their *Kampung* and accompanying my informants on a fishing trip amongst the coastal mangroves in the maritime area bordering Singapore and Malaysia on Singapore's West side. My main informants were the groom (Participant A) and his brother (Participant C) along with some useful discussions with their Father (Participant D)

Please note that I have used certain terms to identify ethnic background such as Malay and *Seletar*. I will necessarily qualify these terms in this account as these do not serve as 'cut and dried' collective ethnic taxonomic terms in agreement with James C Scott who observes that 'All identities, without exception, have been socially constructed: the Han, the Burman, the American, the Danish, all of them.' (2009, xii)

### **Literature: Orang Asli History, Ethnicity and Theory**

The literature specifically about the groups who describe themselves as *Seletar* or are described as such are relatively small and consider two quite different post-colonial contexts; Those of Singapore and of Malaysia. There is wider ranging literature about those who are broadly termed as *Orang Asli*, and this has been useful in researching this article, regarding the broader discourse and scenarios regarding Islamic conversion and government legislation over the years. Although there are some similarities regarding the broader political context regarding policy towards the *Orang Asli* and the ways in which people under this title have interacted with the society at large, there are significant differences between various *Orang Asli* groups, their history, geographical distribution, heritage, language, traditions and current relationships with the other Malaysian ethnic and religious groups. The category itself is broad and as such potentially misleading as a term which includes diverse groups beyond peninsular Malaysia and includes those such as the *Iban*, *Bidayu* and *Kadazan* groups of Borneo. Common themes however are the pressures to convert to Islam and the 'primordial' claim to indigeneity which is part of the contestation of Malay *bumiputera* 'ownership' in Malaysia which is often raised. The work of Nah (2003) explores ambiguous relationship to *Orang Asli* regarding claims to indigeneity. The political dominance of the 'Malay' and 'new-Self' is brought into question by the presence of a marginalised ethnic/racial group, the *Orang Asli* (Nah, 2003, 513).

In terms of defining the distinctiveness of the *Seletar* group, Leonard Andaya (2010) describes them as being part of the Austronesian 'Malayic' linguistic group (which includes the *Orang Asli Melayu* or the Aboriginal Malay) and how they 'combine a basic farming or

fishing subsistence with the more important collection and trade of forest and marine products'. (Andaya 2010, 203) Benjamin further describes the *Seletar* as a Malayic language subgroup of 'strand foragers' (Benjamin & Chou, 2002, 41). This Malayic linguistic grouping of ethnic identity can be compared with the more recent attempts through genetic and biological sampling to make sense of complex historical migratory patterns, influences and intermarriage (Stutz, 2012). Broader anthropological work has discussed and debated the origins and relationships between the *Orang Asli* groups and with other communities as part of a complex set of theories and researches into migration, DNA, linguistic characteristics, agricultural, trading and hunter-gathering practices. Studies have also explored systems of belief and cultural practice including the production of material culture. 'In this vein, I conclude with a consideration of how a biological perspective on life histories may be effectively combined with practice, in order to specify a more useful biocultural definition of human culture' (Stutz, 2012, 58).

In some of this research, the Malayic group have also been described as proto-malays in Lim et al (2010,71) and the *Seletar* are included in this group. which also includes the *Jakun*, *Temuan*, *Semelai*, *Kanaq* and *Kuala*. The *Seletar* are clearly quite distant genetically from the other coastal *Orang Asli* (the *Kanaq* and *Kuala* groups who have their own distant genetic connection), but *Seletar* do have a history of intermarriage with the following groups: Chinese, Deutero-Malays, *Jakun*, *Semelai* and *Asli Borneo* (Lim et al, 2010,79). Their study interestingly concludes that 'the relationships of Proto-Malays are not only dictated by geographical factors but also influenced by their marriage system and the sociocultural behaviour of the tribes but not by the linguistic and religion factors.' (Lim et al, 2010, 81). I will come back to these factors later. Other studies such as Mahani (2011) help to distinguish specific *Orang Asli* groups (in this case the *Kanaq*) from others like the *Kuala* and *Seletar* who might at first scrutiny be mistakenly seen as representing the same grouping, but whose histories, beliefs, origins and cultural practices are significantly different.

Leonard Andaya (2002, 2010) has provided some important historical insights into the

changing role and relationship of the *Orang Asli* with the Malay communities and in particular highlights the period of industrialisation, mineral extraction and farming as creating conflict and division between Malay and *Orang Asli* with regard to their traditional roles, relationships and also the land they occupied. He describes the Melayu civilisation as historically being an 'expansive ethnicity' (Andaya 2002,60) and extends this to the more modern institutionalised approach to assimilation of the *Orang Asli*. He summarises '...it is possible to see how closely related ethnicities and reinforcing lifestyles and traditions were forced by new economic circumstances to move from complementarity to opposition.' (Andaya, 2010, 234). Leary (1994, 93) raises the various historical terminology used for *Seletar* such as *Orang Laut*, *Sea Gypsy* and *Celates* citing mention by Tome' Pires in the early sixteenth century which described them as corsairs living between land and sea and making use of poisoned darts in warfare. Other historical investigations of the relationships and outcomes of estuarine hunter gatherers with commercial interests such as Barnard (1998) which explores timber extraction across the Straits of Malacca in pre-colonial Siak are useful in providing a long-term context for viewing the positioning of this ethnic group in the chains of trade which existed at that time. Trocki refers to the *kangchu* system under which in the 19th century 'Chinese colonies had been established in an area where previously only a few aborigines had lived.' (Trocki, 2007, 204). This provides the historical background to the Johor sultanate sponsored colonisation which underpins the ethnic Chinese heritage which is part of this *Seletar* community.

Harper (1999) provides brief overview of the history of government policy towards *Orang Asli* peoples and in particular, its regional differences. The evolution of such policies are brought up-to-date by Academics such as Rusalina (2011) and Toshihiro (2009). Toshihiro explores in detail the fallout of Islamic conversion amongst an *Orang Asli* community. His important account provides very detailed insight into both recent government policy and its impact and dynamics with regard to the proselytisation of Islam *dakwah* towards *Orang Asli* communities in its implementation. Although his study focuses on a different ethnic community further north in the state of Negeri Sembilan, it provides an interesting

comparator with the *Seletar*.

Mariam Ali in Benjamin & Chou (2002) makes some important observations about the *Orang Seletar*, their relationship with other *Orang Asli* groups from the same region and importantly with the Malays. She highlights traditional differences in world view between Malays and *Seletar*, which I have observed in this case study. This becomes increasingly interesting however, when considering the scenario of multiple hybridity which I have observed. In addition, traditional relationships with ethnic Chinese are addressed in her account and in my work it is clear these have been historically significant, being a part of the heritage of the family group which I have looked-at. Although Ali's study was based on fieldwork conducted 30 years ago in Singapore, multiple and fluid strands of hybridity in family heritage appear to be an important aspect of her research on an ongoing basis and she acknowledges the *Seletar*'s relationship with the Chinese-run *bakau* (Mangrove) charcoal trade amongst the Johor coast.

Several decades of Malaysian/Malay/Singaporean 'navel-gazing' has seen a great deal of literature on Malays, Malayness ranging from 'popular' literature from politicians and 'experts' such as work by ex-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad through to essayist/commentator/academics such as Farish Noor (2002), Academics such as Zawawi (1998) and Western Malaysianists such as Milner (2011), Roff (2009), Harper (1999). In addition, work has been done focusing more closely on Islam as Riddell (2001) has undertaken. Malay identity and its political assertion over time from pre-colonial to colonial and to post-colonial eras are important contextual details in understanding the background. Milner concludes that Malayness is best understood as being part of a 'civilisation' because that term indicates states of mind, representations, structure and logics as well as providing '... a vantage point from which to think more sharply about "race" and "ethnicity"' (Milner 2011, 242). The debate on Malayness is robustly refuted by Shamsul who makes the claim that these forms of problematisation including 'Asli-ness' (Shamsul, 2004, 136) are largely a modern academic extension of colonial discourse. Ultimately, Shamsul draws on these same pre- and postcolonial sources to highlight his own perspective of *authority-defined* and *everyday-defined* social realities which contrast what is experienced against what is

'...observed, interpreted, and possibly imposed.' (Shamsul, 2004, 148). Caryn Lim (2012) interestingly highlights the issue of distinct racial categories in Malaysia though exploring this through the lens of people whose racial background is mixed and thus puts their identity in potential opposition to those categories. She concludes that 'Indeed to a large extent, nationhood and nation building has revolved almost paradoxically around maintaining the rigid boundaries of officialised ethnic identity and, as a result, alternative identities are either neglected, suppressed or subsumed under "Dan lain lain" ('Other')' (Lim, 2012, 27)

I make a number of references to *dakwah*. Riddell (2001) and the work of Nah (2003, 2006) provides a quite recent review of Malayness and its religious dimensions, including *dakwah*. Anthony Milner (2011, p 140) points out, with the broader Malay community, ideological and religious conflict between what might be seen as an arabist-oriented Islamic orthodoxy and more localised *adat* customary practices (including local approaches to Islam) have been happening at least since the early 19th century in the region. Millner (2011, 241) refers to Mahathir era Islamic formalism as part of a process of 'ideological engineering' aimed at creating the 'New Malay'. Nah summarises the new Malay Islamic orthodoxy as follows:

'Over time, non-Muslim "traditional" elements of Malay culture have been marginalised and disavowed, while everyday lifestyles have refocused on Islam. Islam in postcolonial Malaysia has become a potent force, politically imbued with power, that shapes everything "customary" — from rituals, beliefs, prayer times, food and attire, to morality, politics, and economic practices — and legitimises the erasure of certain Malay cultural forms.' (Nah, 2003, 522)

Regarding *dakwah* and how this plays out institutionally in relation to *Orang Asli*, she continues: 'With the appointment of staff, the establishment of a special unit called the "*Dakwah Orang Asli*", and the launching of special state-level programmes, Islamic missionary activities have accelerated to the present — religion tied closely with giving of material rewards.' (Nah, 2003, 527). In relation to *dakwah* (or da'wah), Riddell (2001) highlights the discourse of Muslim Leader Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat 'Becoming Muslim

does not mean becoming Malay, he insists, and thus Indian and Chinese Malaysians need not forgo their cultural identity in embracing Islam.' (Riddell, 2001,309). However, the idea of *masuk melayu* (becoming Malay) is clearly strong amongst *Orang Asli* communities as shown in the work of Toshihiro (2009) and it can be seen in the attitude of Malays themselves whereby dimensions of Malay *adat* (or traditional cultural beliefs) are not easily separated from notions of religious practice and therefore become an expectation towards other newly (or not so newly) converted Muslims.

### **Findings & Observations**

From the outside, it was difficult to detect visual differences as the '*Orang Asli*' family dressed in what appeared to be a Malay style especially the women with their *Baju Kurung* and *Kain Tudung* covering their hair. It was also the case that the groom and his siblings were third generation practising Muslims and therefore could be considered by some to have already '*masuk melayu*'. However, as you will see below, this is not the case in any very simplistic manner. It is also the case that the grandfather of the groom and his siblings was ethnically identified as Chinese and therefore demonstrated another layer of hybridity which had taken place amongst some of the *Orang Seletar* of previous generations who had engaged in the local charcoal or *arang* trade producing a high grade form of charcoal from the local *bakau* or mangrove forests. Coastal Chinese who engaged in these businesses often engaged in familial alliances with local *Orang Asli* families (Lim et al, 2010; Trocki, 2007). This is also significant, because it meant that those who joined these families and trades partly or completely abandoned the nomadic lifestyle of their coastal predecessors before this was to some extent forced on them by the creation of villages including farm-land such as *Kampong Simpang Arang*.

Many of the people still live between two lifestyles, often taking to the water again for a couple of weeks before returning to their fixed homes. Others have not taken up the option of settlement yet. Some shining new homes (four in total) had just been built funded by the Iskandar project which is a major seaport and trading region venture. The *Seletar* from this

region used to roam freely amongst the islands including Singapore which was a temporary 'parking' place according to Participant D. Other studies (Ali, 2002) have traced the presence of semi-permanent *Seletar* in Singapore (incidentally the name of a key Singapore river) and the eventual urbanisation, fragmentation and Singaporean acculturation of these communities. The creation of postcolonial borders has also clearly broken the more fluid freedom to roam previously enjoyed by the wider *Seletar* community.

Many of the younger offspring of the 'settlers' have moved away to work in the cities (especially Johor Bahru after having been educated (and to some extent acculturated) by the Malaysian schools system, but my informants indicated to me that they still retain a strong affinity and identification with their original lifestyle (Interview with participant C). However if the Singaporean case is considered (Ali, 2002), it remains to be seen if this continuity will persist. The difference with the *Seletar* of Johor is that they still have access to the coastal areas in a way which is not possible for the Singaporeans and therefore a kind of dual urban / estuarian identity can potentially be maintained. It is clear from media coverage of recent court cases that *Seletar* settlements more closely located to Johor Bahru feel much more under threat (Shukur, 2015).

The charcoal industries use the *bakau* wood to produce the *arang* (charcoal), thus the name of the village. Produce was traditionally sold to Chinese and Malay middle men (Ali, 2002). The charcoal was and is used for things like cooking satay. It appears that Participant A's Chinese grandfather was either a middle-person or a charcoal maker. I was told that this activity appeared to traditionally be an industry of the estuary Chinese.

My respondents were to some extent outsiders because of their Chinese heritage and this had possibly made it easier to further convert or adopt Muslim identity. However, it is quite possible that their Chinese grandfather had converted to Islam at an earlier point and had introduced both Chinese blood and Islam into his '*Seletar*' offspring at the same time. This is illustrative of the historical fluidity of Malaysian hybridity before the more modern attempts to formalise Malaysian ethnicity. Many *Seletar* still practice forms of 'animism'. More work

needs to be done to identify what actually constitutes local practices under this heading, as it is unlikely to be a formal belief system in the sense of a 'modern' scriptural religion which is in some way fixed in its recorded meanings. As described to me, this belief system appears to be connected to health, sickness and healing and it might also provide some interesting clues to some of the aspects of Malay *adat* (traditional practices) which supposedly pre-dates the arrival of Islam and lives on today in various liminal and fragmentary forms at the boundaries of 'conventional' Islamic practice such as the visits to *bomohs* (Malay practitioners of magic) (Peletz, 1993) one of which I joined on a previous visit to Johor.

My informants told me that there have been some significant health problems on the wider community, some of which seem to have resulted in part to poor adaptation to non-nomadic lifestyles such as living in fixed-structure abodes, some made from concrete. For example, my respondents told me that TB has resulted in some mortality and other conditions such as worms are a problem. There are health schemes such as a free medical centre, but often people will resort to traditional knowledge for healing and so I was told that mass outbreaks of diarrhoea for instance have been solved by traditional remedies where the Western medicine only had limited effectiveness. The remedies come from the *bakau* (mangrove) forests. I was told that a lot of the knowledge is now in danger of being lost, as the young are not learning the extensive knowledge of the older practitioners. It also seems that the old don't want necessarily to share traditional knowledge, as they don't trust the motives of the young, don't trust them to administer them safely or perhaps not administer them within an approved spiritual or religious framework. This is another area which would benefit from further research. In terms of my study it the evident pride in this traditional knowledge held by my Muslim informants was notable as something they continued to identify with.

I went on a fishing and foraging trip into the *bakau* swamps with Participant D, his son, Participant F, and youngest daughter, Participant G. It was a chance to participate in traditional activities of profound cultural significance, but quite significantly adapted from original practices. Outboard engines have allowed greater reach and the possibility to return

home to a single location, as well as fishing-to-order for commercial middle-men. Other technologies have been readily adopted when affordable such as nylon nets and industrially manufactured fibreglass boats. They told me that historically, boats were originally made by the *Seletar* themselves from locally sourced wood. I discussed in brief the use of new communication media in the traditional lifestyle and Participant F had said that it was quite important. Previously smoke signals would be made if someone became stranded or lost somewhere and search parties would be sent out and the smoke used to locate them. Now it was possible to use a phone. Additionally, people were used to gathering food and therefore felt quite comfortable in the riverine environments although access of water could be a problem. Participant F explained that the traditional communities would carry quite large fresh water supplies on the roofs of their boats and would come ashore periodically to replenish these.

An interesting aspect of the fishing was the fact that nothing was wasted. The waste products from opening up the *barongan* (giant sea snails) were kept to feed Participant D's fish in his fish farm. This fish farm shows adaptation by some to a more agrarian and market driven approach to making a living and aligns with development projects organised by the JHEOA (Department of *Orang Asli* affairs), (Toshihiro, 2009). Any unwanted fish which were still alive were returned to the water, especially the 'helmet crabs'. Participant F explained that these were an *ubat* (remedy) for married couples who argued too much. This indicated a continuity of traditional *Seletar* knowledge which was not seen to conflict with newer Islamic practices. A great variety of fish were caught. Many, such as the catfish which had poisonous spines had these spines carefully removed with pliers as fish were removed from the nets. I counted ten different species of fish which were pulled from the prawn nets. All eight of the nets were laid before dawn and then they were left while we collected *barongan* (giant whelks) and set another net to catch *sumpit* in an area close to the Mangrove where they spotted a lot of activity. Along with the fibreglass boat, the outboard motor, the pliers and the nylon net, a great deal of modern technologies were being employed in conjunction with traditional knowledge. They explained that although they used powerful torchlights as

they set off at five am to guide themselves, they were still adept (as were their ancestors) at navigating using starlight and star positions only around the labyrinthine river and estuary systems which made up the *bakau* swamps and islands. The maintenance of these *Seletar* skills, knowledge and practices were evidence of continued engagement and importance of this lifestyle to this family.

They stopped at a floating platform to perform *Fajar* (dawn) prayers led by Participant D. Participant F explained that when this was not possible, prayers were performed sitting in the boat. This showed their strict adherence to the daily Muslim prayer schedules. The platform with its locked wooden hut belonged to 'Orang Melayu' (A Malay person) explained Participant F. This statement clearly indicated the way in which he differentiated himself as *Seletar* and not Malay despite sharing the same religion and perhaps being considered by some to have '*masuk melayu*'. It indicates the fine cultural distinctions and apparently tenacious ethnic pride which characterised their sense of identity, clearly separating ethnicity and religious identity rather than conflating the two.

From their interactions with others we met using the *Seletar* dialect (described by Ali, 2002, 280 as 'their own Malay dialect'), they seem well integrated with the community despite being in part ethnically Chinese and also Muslim rather than following the traditional 'animist' beliefs. We helped to tow a boat containing a man and his wife back to the village which had broken down and were rowing themselves back after gathering crab (crab and prawns seem to be the most lucrative catches). We had been passed earlier on by another boat of similar size to our own from the *Seletar* village which was carrying six people, later, we were passed by another boat with a man, woman and dog. All exchanged idiomatic *Seletar* greetings.

In a later discussion, I discussed Participant F's 'double life' between the fishing community and his work in the nearby Port (*Pelabuhan Tanjong Pelepas*) where he checks container documentation for goods loading and unloading. He stressed the importance and meaningfulness of the fishing way of life and connection with the sea and estuaries.

Although this did not necessarily mean the same connection with traditional spiritual belief, certainly a lot of the traditional knowledge which may have been connected with it was still valued and retained. As with Participant A, he seemed to have pride in the traditional methods of healing (*ubat*) such as the use of mudskipper-based product to treat asthma.

It was clear that in terms of making a living, fishing was becoming much more marginal and the cash jobs he and many of his siblings were now doing were important in contributing to the family income as a whole, but that the subsistence aspect and the link with a tradition and a way of life was particularly important. In a sense, this marked a return to a more traditional role of the fishing lifestyle for subsistence purposes and even the gifting of catches to people (like myself) from outside represented a form of barter similar to what used to be conducted according to Participant D. In giving me some of the catch, they perhaps felt that I was being rewarded for the small amount of labour I contributed on the trip and perhaps more generally the interest I expressed (as an outsider) in their way of life.

Participant F explained that he was getting married in a couple of weeks and that his wife would not mind the time he spent away from home as she was local and would be quite happy to join him on fishing trips and would consider his use of his days off for such trips as normal. It seems that although now settled in fixed village locations with some allocations of agricultural land, any long absences from the river and sea environment even for these more recent Muslim converts would not be a comfortable thing to countenance. A Malay wife of one member of the community asked me if Participant D's wife had accompanied us on our trip. This was interesting and confirmed the active participation of the women in the hunter-gathering aspect of the lifestyle of the *Orang Seletar*. Mariam Ali mentions this female participation as reflecting '...a more egalitarian arrangement than that of Malays.' (2002, 288). Although some aspects of work such as cooking appeared to be allocated on gender lines (I observed this to be done by women), there appears to be some flexibility. Certainly, Participant G, their teenage unmarried daughter was quite happy to climb into the deep mud to collect *barongan*.

(Participant E) said that around ten people from his community worked in the *pelabuhan*, including another brother (Participant E), but more research would be useful to establish the wider diasporic patterns of others from the community. It would be useful to find out:

- How far away did they choose to live and work?
- What types of integrations did they practice with regard to other Malaysians- especially Malays?

This is the intended subject of future research. Some work by Mariam Ali (2002) in Singapore addresses the urbanisation process there and where the link to traditional fishing grounds and coastal settlement has largely been broken.

### **Discussion**

One question I have asked myself as a researcher is whether it is meaningful, in a world of interpenetrating cultural influences and communication media, to identify a particular group or 'tribe' under a particular name or collectivity. Is it perhaps anachronistic in an ethnographic sense to artificially join diverse individuals together under an academic discourse as might have made more sense within previous anthropological paradigms and eras? In this instance, it is clear that this idea is still meaningful both to the subjects being researched who self-identify as *Seletar* along with the external way that they continue to be identified in an institutional sense generically as *Orang Asli* and more specifically as *Orang Seletar*. Geoffrey Benjamin comes to a similar position in his collection 'Tribal Communities in the Malay world' (2002,12). Significant diversity of lifestyles, religious beliefs and practices characterise the *Seletar*, ranging from generations of Muslim *Seletar* to the much more ancient animist beliefs. It is clearly evident also, that liminal identification is evident with Malays and malayness through Muslim identity, as taught in Malaysia and as propagated through relationships with Malaysians through marriage for instance. This of course is nothing new in terms of Malay heritage itself which tends to have a multi-ethnic dimension with many Malays originating from Semi-nomadic riverine communities and also through historical intermarriage with various *Orang Asli* ethnicities (Discussion with

participant B). The evidence of the partial ethnic Chinese heritage of the family of my informants also characterises the historical hybridity amongst the *Seletar* and populations in the state of Johor overall.

More evidence of what provides coherence and cohesiveness amongst this group is the continuing use of shared *Seletar* dialect despite Malay-based education being provided within Malaysian national frameworks. When I began my discussions with my respondents and asked them about their *Orang Asli* identity, they very quickly refined this to identify with the term *Seletar* as kind of tribal and linguistic identity despite their own divergence from the animistic spiritualistic belief system which could be considered an anachronistic ethnographic marker of their *Asli* identity. My further interactions with them also indicated a sophisticated accommodation with their ethnic cousins and their different beliefs while also retaining and valuing aspects of traditional learning such as survival techniques and medicinal practices using the coastal flora and fauna for healing and protection against a number of afflictions such as asthma. Milner (2011, 232) refers to Judith Nagata's (1974, 346) term 'ethnic oscillation' with regard to holding two parallel identities and switching between them depending on social context and social function and there appears to be an element of this quite Malaysian trait in their own enactment of identity.

For those who are making the connection with the modern urbanised Johorian life, the identification with key aspects of *Seletar* existence are clearly still important and meaningful. I have observed that for male and female *Seletar*, trips to fish and collect the produce of the many *bakau* estuaries which still exist around the Johor coastline and its surrounding islands are an important way of maintaining a sense of autochthonous identity. These activities serve to cement forms of cultural cohesion, engaging in collective family-based activities including the collection and preparation of produce. Although the sale of such produce beyond the evident subsistence which is provided, is of relevance, it is clearly not the key function for those who work outside the community. For participant F to be able to embark on a 'hunting, gathering' trip several mornings a week when not doing his jobs in the nearby cargo port, it

was clearly meaningful and important at a level not connected to formal work or income in a modernistic sense. The identification with cultural activities which are significantly autochthonous and which link the *Seletar* to the fringes of the sea between Johor and Singapore. Time spent fishing with them helped to clarify this link for me, but it is also evidenced by a recent court case brought against developers of the Iskandar regional development initiative regarding desecration of ancestral burial sites (Shukur, 2015).

Rusaslina Idrus suggests that 'Tribal communities chose to lead and maintained independent lives to the centre state to avoid being co-opted' (2011, 103). This cultural trait were it to be true could be an important part of explaining resistance to changes being brought about from a central administration such as the conditionality of new housing being provided on the basis of conversion to Islam and the general pressures being created by new developments.

In the context of modern day South East Asian *dakwah*, a significant amount of peer pressure and formal measures (in the case of Malaysia) take place to encourage forms of Malay Muslim orthodoxy. Forms of disapproval of apparent transgression from that orthodoxy in dress, behaviour and superstition are evident in broader Malay society (Discussion with participant B). It is clearly possible to observe the attempts to bring the *Seletar* more completely into the ambit of Islam and this is often through inducements such as the provision of *Iskandar* sponsored housing which I observed which could come under the category of corporate public relations and can also be interpreted as a manifestation of missionary conversion activity familiar to previous generations of Western colonial projects. Interestingly, I saw no direct evidence of this type of *dakwah* activity being conducted by Muslim *Seletar* themselves and it seems to come from external initiatives. Toshihiro (2009) highlights the Malaysian governments move from a relatively enlightened approach of integration after independence to a more overt policy of assimilation since the 1980s. However, legal confusion has developed between cultural definitions of converted *Orang Asli* and their legal status with regards to special rights currently accorded to Malays. This has resulted in a new category to be created: 'Muslim *Orang Asli*' (Toshihiro, 2009,42).

Economic differences are evident within the community, which are due both to the grants

and gifts provided to those who embrace Islam and the longer term opportunities which arise through Islamic/Malay business, cultural and employment connections outside the community. Educational opportunities also play a part in these differences. Nevertheless, it is clear that significant amounts of the community resist such efforts to be converted, despite the evident poverty, social and health problems which exist amongst those who do not appear interested in divesting themselves of more tradition belief systems. Strong *Orang Asli* narratives often based on historical conflicts with the Malays support this. (Nowak and Muntil, 2004)

Toshihiro's thesis (2009, 304) that Islamisation policy will decisively affect the future of the *Orang Asli* in Malaysia may be correct, but it may not always result in the 'deculturalisation which he posits'. Judging by the continued cultural affiliation to the identity and practices of the *Seletar* by at least one established family of *Seletar* Muslims, a future of reculturation within an adapted frame of *Seletar* identity which maintains many of the existing cultural reference points, might be a reasonably positive outcome for this community if many more convert to Islam. However, undoubtedly such a process cannot also avoid being accompanied by change and a divestment over time of certain beliefs and practices which would be difficult to maintain against the current rubric of Malaysian muslim orthodoxy. It is also not beyond the bounds of possibility that the current status quo of maintaining cultural identity is a product of the tension between traditionalists and converts amongst the community and that Muslim / *Seletar* dual identity as observed in this case study can only exist in this way when balanced by the existing lifestyle and beliefs of the more traditional members of the community. Therefore the evident threat presented by new development of surrounding land and transformations to the physical environment may well contribute the largest threat to this balance in the longer term.

In focusing on a single family, my study did not have the breadth or the timescale of Toshihiro's study (2009) in neighbouring Negeri Sembilan state and the community I was looking at was of a different ethnicity despite having the same *Orang Asli* legal status as the

community examined in his study. I did not observe any overt tensions over Islamic proselytisation in the village as were observed by Toshihiro (2009), although the evidence of the 'inducements' to convert were clearly there. I hope that it will be possible to explore this aspect of the *Simpang Arang Orang Seletar* community through a longer term engagement with them. Nevertheless, my observations of how this particular family functionally and culturally integrated with the community provided a clear picture of the way that they clearly saw themselves positioned in relation to Malay and *Seletar* ethnic identity. The identity of this particular family in relation to an idea of a 'traditional' *Seletar* is quite interesting to assess as well as the ways in which they 'approve' or 'disapprove' of the traditional beliefs. Certainly they continue to use the local dialects and share these with non-Muslims. Many post *dakwah* Malays would be horrified at animist beliefs, but Participant A and family seemed to be making more sympathetic accommodations with the traditional beliefs and their practitioners, perhaps recognising their own lineage and relatively recent familial conversion to Islam. It is telling that Participant F described the fishing platform as belonging to '*Orang Melayu*'. It indicated that he did not consider his family to have '*masuk melayu*' despite his grandfather's *masuk Islam*.

The ways in which they quickly adopt new technologies such as mobile phones and outboard motors and apply them as tools to address their current situation in combination with traditional knowledge and practices seems significant as this is part of a broader pragmatism. This pragmatism appears to extend from modernity to their history in trying to retain identification with their language and ethnicity alongside Muslim faith in the face of pressures to conform more closely with a Malay Muslim orthodoxy. In the case of this particular group, it appeared that on the one hand they were accepted by the broader *Seletar* community despite being Muslim precisely because they were not new converts to the faith and were not seen as a product of more recent proselytisation. They also represented other aspects of *Seletar* and Malaysian hybridity due to their ethnic Chinese heritage which was incidentally not unusual amongst the *Seletar* according to Ali (2002). Another important factor regarding their identification with *Seletar* identity is their limited acceptance by

Malays as being *Melayu* 'not quite/not yet Malays' (Rusaslina, 2011,115) and therefore the result of this is a distinct familial sub-identity. This raises an interesting question about how fine-grained any category of identity is used either to subjectify or objectify and whether identity in a fragmented and globalised world should best be understood at a familial rather than a broader community or societal level.

## **Conclusion**

Mariam Ali importantly observed that '...there is a difference between ethnic identification and cultural identification. A group of people may display cultural features characteristic of the various Malay groups, but may still not be accepted by them as Malay.'(Ali in Benjamin & Chou, 2002,275). Ali states this lack of acceptance as applying to *Seletar* who have not converted to Islam, but I have observed that this is also the case in those *Seletar* who are Muslim. In fact, such differentiation is part of the agency and self-identification of those same *Seletar*. Thus, this cannot be considered to be something which is entirely imposed on them. In a broad sense, it could be argued that this family are emblematically Malaysian (and in fact Malay) in the way that they represent and embody so many different ethnic and religious strands which are part of Malaysia today and which can be found in the heritage of other Malaysians when looking more closely at the ethnic and historical family roots of any so-called Malay families. Rusaslina suggests that 'What has emerged as we look back in history is that the two groups were not always so distinct from each other. In fact, what we see is a repeated pattern of the two groups being aggregated and at other times being made distinct, usually to the political advantage of the more dominant group, the Malays.' (2011,119).

The roots of putative Malaysian pluralism are somewhat different from those which underpin British multiculturalism for instance, and in both cases, these are sanitisation and social projects which are contested and unequal. Certainly in terms of Modood's notions of multiculturalism (Antonisch, 2015), a form of equality in diversity should be practiced in an apparently multicultural nation like Malaysia regardless of additional debates and claims

regarding distinct indigeneity of Malays as opposed to *Orang Asli*. This group of people can be seen as being exceptional and therefore not representative or illustrative of broader apparent social and ethnic strata in Malaysian strata as these are popularly represented. However, this exceptionalism in a society with high levels of concealed ethnic and cultural hybridity should be seen as emblematic and illustrative of the degree to which Malaysia is far from being comprised of the *multi-monocultures* which are characterised in Malaysian ethnic politics.

The reason why this is important is that the implications of my findings reinforce those who problematise modern Malaysian Muslim identity and this type of example provides a strong argument for the recognition of diversity and perhaps interculturalism within Malaysian Islam with regard to ethnic and cultural underpinnings: for example, valuing different forms of *adat* alongside religious doctrines and assumptions. It also represents an equally strong argument for the recognition and valuing of cultural and religious diversity in Malaysia as a whole beyond the normative ethnic identifications routinely used. Indeed, this can be taken down to cultural and social identity at an individual familial level where each family embodies its own distinct core cultural and religious values which are distinct from broader institutional identities embodied in national legislation. Nevertheless, we should also view this case study at a broader collective level. Although it can't be said that the *Seletar* community is without its own internal conflicts, there is a cultural and linguistic thread which binds them together despite different religious affiliations and increasing incentives provided for divergence from traditional 'pre-Islamic' beliefs and practices with the seeming intention of them becoming a certain kind of model Malay. The Muslim *Seletar* are *different* in the Malaysian context by virtue of their liminal Malayness and distinct amongst the *Seletar* as Muslims whilst still self-identifying their ethnicity as *Seletar*.

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