

Contemporary Profiles: Four Orang Asli Women



9 Contemporary Profiles

TIJAH CHOPIL **A Vision of One Heart.¹**

by Adela Baer

Tijah Chopil invented the phrase *Sinui Pai Nanuk Sngik* (SPNS)—“New life one heart.” In the Semai language, it signifies that solidarity among Orang Asli will ensure a future for them. Tijah established SPNS as an organization in 1995, when she was 17 years old, to improve the life of Orang Asli in West Malaysia. As coordinator of SPNS, she has worked for Orang Asli rights in many ways.

Tijah is the sixth of ten children. When her father died she was 12 years old, and her ailing mother needed her help in raising the younger children. Tijah soon began working mornings with her 16-year-old sister as a rubber tapper, walking eight kilometers to work every day to help the family. She attended school in the afternoons. On weekends and during the school holidays she also worked in a Chinese vegetable farm with her sister. When her older sister fell ill, Tijah had to quit school to help out at home. Her two youngest siblings couldn’t attend school for lack of money. Because they wanted to learn, Tijah taught them how to read and write at home in the evenings. She soon started an evening kindergarten in her village.

Some village people criticized her at first for what they considered showing off. A government teacher from a nearby village even accused her of holding classes illegally and threatened her with arrest. None of this deterred Tijah. Today her organization has community education programs in four villages in the state of Perak and is starting programs in eight others, including three in the state of Negeri Sembilan. All of



Plate 9.1 Tijah Chopil.
(Colin Nicholas 2003)

the teachers are volunteers and, as funds can be scraped together, are provided with training and supplies by Tijah and her helpers. The programs cover formal and informal education for children ages three through 12 years, informal education for youth groups and for men and women (many with no prior education), and a special program for women's self-development.

Besides her many teaching initiatives, Tijah has collaborated with others in studying and reporting on the use of rainforest resources by Orang Asli women.² She served as chairperson of the Indigenous Peoples' Network of Malaysia (*Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia*, or JOAS) for two years, the first Orang Asli and the first woman to hold that post.

In March, 2001 she co-convoked the National Conference on Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge, jointly organized by JOAS and the Faculty of Law at the Universiti Malaya. The conferees pointed out that Malaysia's indigenous communities have mastered much knowledge about how plants and other biological agents are useful in treating illness and promoting health, as well as knowledge for sustaining the earth's resources. Malaysia's natural-products business sector has ignored their contributions. As Tijah noted at the conference, even the Malaysian Ministry of Health ignored the Orang Asli when it set up a program to organize Malaysian practitioners of traditional

medicine. “Why were we not invited?” she asked. “You can’t say that you don’t know about the existence of Orang Asli herbalists or holders of knowledge of traditional medicine. That is impossible. History tells you about our existence and our dependence on the forest and its products, not only for food but for our medicinal needs as well.” Tijah was concerned about this cold-shouldering because if Orang Asli could indeed become part of the Ministry’s drive to integrate traditional medicine into the government’s health services, this would enable them to continue their healing systems and to be part of national life, rather than having their existence ignored.

In 2002 she helped organize a workshop on methods to map Orang Asli home territories that involved Orang Asli from 16 villages.

For too long Orang Asli have been marginalized, dispossessed, and derided in their ancient homeland. Tijah and other Orang Asli women are vocal supporters of their communities. This new generation provides much needed strength for advancing the welfare of their people.

MELATI JAMIL

Father’s Tears, A Source Of Courage

By Ruhaiza Rusmin³

Translated by Rusalina Idrus

“Seeing my father’s tears and determination in getting me to continue schooling inspired me to go on, even when people were making fun of me because I was an Orang Asli. I tried to be brave and made a pledge to prove to people that I could succeed and even could be better than them,” Melati Jamil said, sharing the sad moments during her school years.

Now the rebuffs and ridicule are no longer heard; instead they are replaced by congratulations on Melati’s success in her studies and her career. Today she is an administrative and financial executive secretary at Talisman Malaysia Limited.

Melati, the third of six children, was born on 27 December, 1962, at Tanjung Sepat, Selangor. She received her early education at the



Plate 9.2 Melati Jamil.
(Colin Nicholas 2002)

Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan Tanjung Sepat before continuing her secondary education at the Sekolah Menengah Teluk Doto, Banting. Having excelled in the SPM examination, Melati went on to pursue a diploma in secretarial studies at the Mara Institute of Technology in 1981. She graduated in 1983.

Success did not come easily, but it was earned through many tears and hardships since her father, Jamil Katan, was just a farmer. In addition to farming, Jamil and his wife, Sidah Peron, earned additional money as fisherpeople. They made many sacrifices to ensure their children had access to proper education.

“My father and mother were willing to do anything to ensure that we got our education. Even though they faced much hardship, they were insistent on the value of a good education. They realized that only education can help provide for a better life for us in the future. My father always told us he did not want us to inherit his poverty.”

Although Melati was always determined to continue her studies, at one time she almost decided to quit school because she could not stand the rebuffs and hurtful things said to her by the other students. According to Melati, she could not help but feel sad and humiliated. She felt even sadder seeing her father in tears, asking her to be patient and to continue her studies.

“That is why I made a promise to myself to repay my father’s tears. Now I can only smile as my persistence has paid off, and I now have a good job.”

For the sake of pursuing knowledge, she used to walk for 2 kilometers alone through a palm oil estate, a place known to harbor dangerous species of snakes such as boa constrictors and pythons. “I used to walk to school in the dark, guided only by a lantern, and I had to walk through the oil palm estate. I prayed to God that I would be safe as it was just something I had to endure. I once was chased down by a bull and was almost killed. Being picked on, being chased by a bull, I went through all that because I was determined to fulfill my father’s wishes and help lead my family out of poverty’s embrace. I wanted to prove that an Orang Asli child can succeed.”

At the university, Melati still could not escape this feeling of inferiority and lack of self-confidence, especially since she had to compete with students from more prosperous backgrounds. According to Melati, to ensure that her family’s dream came true, she had to double her efforts to overcome her shyness in mixing with the other students on campus.

“I realized that without hard work, I would continue to be stuck at the bottom. Because of that, although I was shy and people used to make fun of me, I was determined to overcome every problem. I had to get over my shyness for my own good. My parents had high hopes, and I did not want all their sacrifices to go to waste.”

Her family’s dream to see her succeed finally came about when Melati was offered a job at a real estate company, before she moved on to her present position.

According to Melati, who is an animist, her success was due to hard work and support from her father. She was also motivated by the successes of her brother, Sembunyi, and her sister, Sarimah. Sembunyi is an assistant director at the JHEOA Gua Musang, and Sarimah is a teacher at the Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan Tanjung Sepat. The success of three of her younger siblings, Juni, Hazali, and Jemee, is also an inspiration to the rest of the Orang Asli in their village.

According to Melati, to achieve success Orang Asli have to change

their attitude and be brave, to face all adversity and be willing to accept changes. “There are a lot of opportunities out there and they are not limited to certain ethnic groups only. What is important is hard work and the realization that without working hard, one cannot go far.”

“Do not let your skin color or race be a barrier to achieving success; instead they should be your source of motivation to foster self-confidence,” Melati said. She is currently the vice president of POASM.

ZAITUN Overcomes Her Shyness

By Ruhaiza Rusmin⁴

Translated by Rusaslina Idrus

During my first job after university, I was willing to travel alone on my motorbike from Batu Kikir, Negeri Sembilan, to Tasik Bera, Pahang, just to prove my spirit and determination to achieve success,” said Zaitun Surut, now Community Development Manager for Gunung Ganang Sdn Bhd. “Although I am an Orang Asli, my perseverance and hard work in the past paid off when I finally did achieve success.”

A Temuan, Zaitun, now 31, had to go through much hardship when she was young. Born in the Orang Asli settlement of Kampung Guntur, Batu Kikir, Negeri Sembilan, Zaitun worked to help her family to survive. According to Zaitun, it was hard work as a child having to help her father, Surut Bakil, earn a living to raise the family of eight children.

“My father was a farmer who earned a meager living tapping rubber, while my mother, Dango Sombong, was a housewife. Life was difficult then. My siblings and I worked together to support the family. Even as a child, my father taught me to be independent and to help the family always.”

“I would go into the forest to harvest rattan, and I also helped my father tap rubber. I felt bad seeing my father having to work so hard



Plate 9.3 Zaitun Surut.
(Colin Nicholas 1998)

to raise us all. Nevertheless, we never neglected our studies. Education was our ticket out of poverty,” said Zaitun, the youngest in the family.

To pursue knowledge, Zaitun had to leave her family at the age of seven to go to school at the Sekolah Rendah Senibai, Negeri Sembilan. “I had to live with my eldest sister in order to attend school. It was not that I wanted to leave my family but life was hard then. In addition, there was no educational facility in my village, so I was willing to live with my sister, who was a cook at the Senebai school. My father convinced me that I would be able to get a better education if I stayed with her.”

Zaitun later went to Sekolah Menengah Undang Abdul Manaf, Negeri Sembilan, before going on to Universiti Putra Malaysia in 1990 to pursue a degree in social development. Her experience during her five years at the university taught her a lot about the meaning of patience and perseverance, especially since she had to struggle with not having enough money and having to live in a new environment.

According to her, although her friends accepted her, she could not help but feel inferior to them. In fact, she even felt more so, having to compete with top students from all over the country.

“I realized who I was. At times, I would just isolate myself, even though my friends were willing to accept me. In addition, my English was not very good. I suffered because most of our textbooks were in English. I have to admit, when I was first at the university, I always

gave up too easily. That is, until a friend made me realize that the thing I was most afraid of was only my own shadow. My friend was always giving me words of encouragement. She reminded me that the reason I made it there was because my parents had worked hard to ensure that I achieved success in life. Those words snapped me back into reality. From then on, I worked to overcome my feelings of shyness and inferiority.”

While at university, Zaitun had to be very careful with her funds as she relied completely on her scholarship money. “Although I was the youngest, my family was poor and I did not have the heart to burden them further. I was willing to endure the financial hardship on my own. For food, I would buy a packet of rice and divide it into two. I’d eat half for lunch and the other half for dinner. It was sad not to have enough to eat, and at times the rice that I kept for dinner went bad and I had no food, but I just had to save money for school. As for lecture notes, I would mostly copy them by hand. I would only sleep three hours per night so that I could have more time to study. Although it was tiring, I did not want to give up, especially when I thought about my family and their hopes and dreams.”

Zaitun graduated in 1996 with a bachelor’s degree, second class honors, majoring in social development. Upon graduation, she got a job with an international organization as a community development officer. Her first task was to work on a development project for the Orang Asli community in Tasik Bera, Pahang. She had to commute 200 kilometers daily, from her village to Tasik Bera, in order to work on this project.

“It is true that at first I doubted I could carry out this project. But then I thought about it; this is my chance to prove that an Orang Asli can be successful. I was willing to take on this challenge. Every day I would leave my house at five in the morning, traveling on my motorbike for four hours. I had to go through empty stretches of road all alone on my bike. I was afraid, no doubt about it. I once had an encounter with a snake and another time with an elephant. But I was determined to get the job done, since it was my responsibility. I traveled back and forth for two weeks until my employers provided me with a temporary accommodation in the village. Even though those

experiences have long passed, it is those instances of overcoming hardship that led to my success.”

Her marriage to Azman Udang, a Mah Meri businessman, has strengthened Zaitun’s determination to help the Orang Asli community, in particular for it to excel in education. According to Zaitun, the couple works together to help their community, for example by providing books for students and ensuring that their community, especially the younger generation, has access to basic amenities such as water and electricity.

“Even though our contribution is not much, it is a start. I want the Orang Asli community to emerge from poverty and participate together in development that is planned by the government. Skin color and race should not be a hindrance to success. What is important is hard work and the determination to overcome all obstacles in life.”

PONG Proves She Can Do It

By Ruhaiza Rusmin⁵

Translated by Rusalina Idrus

“Although I never made it to the ivory tower, I have always worked hard to move ahead in life. I want to dispel the myth that Orang Asli, in particular Orang Asli women, cannot succeed in the business world,” said entrepreneur Pong anak Panjang. She has worked to prove that Orang Asli women can succeed if they are willing to work hard.

Pong, 51, was born in Perkampungan Orang Asli (Orang Asli settlement) Daun Labu Kubung, Teluk Intan, Perak. Her life growing up was filled with hardship. Her father, Panjang Lila Perkasa, worked as a rubber tapper while her mother, Embin Long, was a housewife.

“My father worked hard to earn us a living while my mother took care of us at home. We lived hand to mouth, day to day. But my father never neglected our education. Although it was difficult, we were still sent to school. My father said that even if we were not able to go to university, that was okay, as long as we had enough useful knowledge to help us through life’s challenges,” said Pong. She



Plate 9.4 Pong Panjang.
(Colin Nicholas 2005)

completed five years of secondary schooling at the Sekolah Menengah Hamid Khan, Tapah, Perak, from 1966 to 1971.

A member of the Semai group, Pong, the eldest of 14 children, received her primary schooling at the Sekolah Rendah Chendorong Balai, Teluk Intan. She had to walk 15 kilometers to get to school, and because she had no pocket money, she had to stay hungry the whole day.

“As early as six in the morning, before dawn, I would leave the house with a torch to guide my way. I had to be brave, even though I was afraid I would run into snakes or other wild animals.”

“When I got home I would be so tired, but I had to help my father tap rubber. On weekends I never rested; I would instead work as a hired laborer, picking peppers for 25 cents per hour, to add to the family income. I did not have the heart to see my father work so hard to earn us a living. As the eldest child, I had a huge responsibility.” She willingly sacrificed her ambition to further her studies to give way to her younger siblings. Three of them, Ami (the fourth), Lioh (sixth) and Husni (seventh), did succeed in reaching the ivory tower.

After completing her SPM, Pong was offered a position as assistant community developer at the Department for Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), where she worked for 20 years before retiring in 1992.

“My responsibility was to take care of the welfare of the Orang Asli community. They are behind in all aspects of life, and this saddens

me. They needed help, but I did not know how to help them as long as I was tied to my work. I decided therefore to retire and seek alternative ways to improve my own livelihood and to help other Orang Asli.”

Nevertheless, after retirement Pong felt rather lost. She was not sure what new arena to venture into. When she had been working she had been so focused on the duties given to her that later she was not sure what to do next.

Pong was interested in trying her hand at business, but she did not have the skills or the capital to start a business. With the support of her husband, Achom Luji, who is the head of the Orang Asli Broadcast at Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), they started investing their savings in the stock market and began to save for start-up funds for their future business.

“Friends were not that confident that we would make it. They warned us that life in the city would cost a lot. This encouraged me to invest my savings in the stock market.” She added that she studied the market by reading books about it.

To avoid risking their savings greatly, Pong bought only low-risk shares. Some friends laughed at her for being afraid to take any high risk.

“My intention was to get enough money to start a business. I used the profit from my investments to open an Orang Asli craft store,” she said. Pong’s Kedai Asli Kraf, located at the Central Market in Kuala Lumpur, is proof of her hard work, and proof that Orang Asli can indeed succeed on their own. Pong and Achom also have five children: Saliah Susanti, Amelia Susanti, Eime Susanti, Arma and Vicky Eleq.

Pong was able to achieve her ambition to help the Orang Asli community, as her business helps market handicrafts produced by the community. “Orang Asli have a rich tradition of wood carvings and of weaving. I help promote this to the local consumers and tourists. I therefore help the Orang Asli to increase their income level. The response to my shop has been encouraging, especially from the foreign tourists who appreciate ethnic art.”

“My ability is limited and I can only contribute so much to the Orang Asli community. People did not think I could make it in the

business world, but they think differently now,” said Pong. She is also a member of PUSPANITA and the Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (POASM).

ENDNOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 25 (4): 59, 2002.
2. See Nicholas et al., 2003 and Koh, 2003 for further information on Tijah Chopil and her work. The email address for SPNS is spns@myjaring.net.
3. A Malay language version of this essay appeared in *Harian Metro* 12 July, 2003.
4. A Malay language version of this essay appeared in *Harian Metro*, 2 August, 2003.
5. A Malay language version of this essay appeared in *Harian Metro* 28 June, 2003.