

Swettenham and the Orang Asli

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After 1871 the British, French, and Dutch became overtly expansionist in their Southeast Asian areas of influence and power (Emerson, 1937; Kiernam, 1956). This “forward movement” provided a vehicle for the work of Frank Swettenham in Malaya, who arrived there in 1870.¹ He became a major force in setting colonial priorities and practices in Malaya over a long period. In 1896 he was named Resident-General of the Federated Malay States, having a legal advisor, commissioner of police, and a director of public works under him in his Kuala Lumpur headquarters. In 1904 he retired as High Commissioner for the Malay States and Governor of the Straits Settlements. He was “the giant among builders of British Malaya” (Heussler, 1981, p. 83).

In 1872, once he became fluent in Malay, Swettenham traveled throughout the peninsula, either with senior officials or with his own retinue.² In this way he encountered the indigenous Orang Asli from time to time and, because he wrote copiously, his writings provide a broad window on British colonial attitudes and policies toward these “first people” of the country.³

In the larger context, Swettenham’s prestige in Malaya made it easy for other British colonialists there to accept his judgment on Orang Asli, whom he called “Jacoon” or “Sakai.”⁴ This had far-reaching consequences for the Orang Asli and for the natural environment, both in substance and symbol.

Swettenham was largely concerned with the intent of colonial rule, meaning the British dominance of the Malay sultanates in order to exploit Malaya’s natural resources, mainly tin and plantation produce such as sugar, tobacco, and coffee. To this end, he interacted primarily with two groups. One was the Malay elites, accomplished by “making real friends of the Malay Rulers, their Chiefs, and also their people” (Burns and

¹ Late in life, Swettenham wrote that a genuine concern for the native people, not capitalistic greed, motivated the forward movement (Swettenham, 1942, pp. 30, 81).

² For example, his trip up the Bernam and Slim rivers and across the main range to Pahang took him into Semai country (Swettenham, 1885). Semai, Temuan, Jakun, and Besisi are just a few of the indigenous groups collectively called Orang Asli. He also saw Orang Asli working on a tobacco plantation established by a Dutchman by the Damasara Road in the late 1870s (Barlow, 1995, p. 290), saw Temuan when visiting Batu Caves in 1880 (ibid, p. 219), and saw Temuan again in 1883 at Ulu Langat (ibid, p. 241).

³ Interestingly, Barlow’s massive, critical biography of Swettenham (1995) does not list Orang Asli, indigenes, aborigines, or even “Sakai” or Jacoon” in its index, nor is Swettenham’s paper on “Jacoons” (1894) listed in the bibliography. Moreover, while northern Perak was thinly populated in the 1870s, it was not only Malays who lived there (ibid, p. 41).

⁴ For example, under the centralized power of Swettenham as Resident-General were many district officers who in their districts were “the Magistrate, the Chief of Police, the Public Works and Survey and Land Officer, the Surgeon, the Treasurer, the Coroner... The magistrate had to travel all over his district to learn its capabilities, encourage people to take up land and build houses, know everyone and be pleasant to good citizens with at least one eye on the naughtily inclined” (Swettenham, 1920, p. 242). In the 1880s, Swettenham had already brought Malay aristocrats into the system as paid village or district headmen in Selangor, but no Orang Asli were so recognized in their home districts in the state. Furthermore, by encouraging investor-backed plantation development of immense land tracts through “peppercorn” lease fees, coupled with his encouragement of cheap labor from India and China and the immigration of Malay farmers from Indonesian islands, Swettenham effectively abetted the loss of Orang Asli land holdings. The forest became a de facto British monopoly.

Cowan, 1975, p. v).⁵ The other was the Chinese, both those in the interior and the Chinese businessmen in coastal cities and in Singapore. His interactions with Orang Asli were largely desultory, even though many lowland and southern Orang Asli were conversant in Malay. As he never troubled himself about their ethos and culture, his usual description of them as savage or wild was gratuitous at best. It seems Orang Asli were at the bottom of the heap of lesser people.⁶

Lesser people were quite numerous, according to Swettenham. For example, while touting the Malay spoken by the rajas and by himself, he viewed "...Sarawak and Labuan Malays as lately emerged out of Jacoonism, Sakei-ism, Dyak-ism, Brunei-ism, in fine barbarism, and as such speaking an impure language."⁷ He could be peevish, dismissive, even sarcastic at times.

Most significantly, although the destruction of the natural environment by means of technology can be traced back many centuries in Christian Europe (White, 1967), the environment of Malaya received its first major shock in the 19th century when the British subjugated the peninsula and promoted widespread rainforest destruction. Huge placer tin mines, cash-crop plantations, and larger towns were the result of this juggernaut. Swettenham saw these environmental changes as improvements: nature meant natural resources (Aiken, 1973). He was little interested in flora or fauna except "that which could be shot" (Barlow, 1995, p. 327). In particular, he oversaw the imposition of land regulations, both in Perak and Selangor, that ignored Orang Asli land rights.⁸ But before the British had roads and railways built, most of their incursions were by river craft because land exploration was on foot or, if possible, by elephant.⁹ The British would have seen Orang Asli both on the rivers and on forest tracts, but not riding on an elephant unless possibly in a British entourage, such as during Swettenham's first visit to Selangor in 1872. That was when he and James G. Davidson went up the Klang River to Bukit Kuda, where they started on an elephant ride into the interior. Accompanying the expedition from Bukit Kuda was a "Jacon," whom Swettenham later described as his "poor little friend 'Polywog.'" This man, probably a Besis or Temuan, was later killed by a marauding faction of Malay Rajas, sometime before November, 1874 (Burns and Cowan, 1975, p. 142).¹⁰ It is striking that nowhere else in Swettenham's published journals of the years 1874-1876 did he mention any other Orang Asli individually, although those 331 pages contain names of numerous Europeans, Chinese, and Malays (ibid).

⁵ Some 80 years later, General Gerald Templer and his officials in Malaya decided they wanted to include Orang Asli among their real friends, to win their "hearts and minds" during the Communist insurrection.

⁶ Swettenham's condescension to, or prejudice against, many cultural groups is documented in Barlow (1995).

⁷ Quoted in Barlow, 1995, p. 175, based on a memo written by Swettenham, 27 December, 1876.

⁸ Swettenham gave the planter, E. V. Carey, a large island in 1900. As Resident-General of the Federated Malay States, Swettenham fended off opposition to his decision and granted Carey the land. Such grants commonly provided a 999-year lease with a miniscule rent. Years later, in gratitude, Carey and another man pressed for a bust to be made of Swettenham (Barlow, 1995, pp. 490, 679). This entire island was in 1900 the home territory of Besis Orang Asli but after Carey's take-over they retained only a small area there. About the same time, Swettenham himself rather deviously obtained a concession of 25,000 acres in Johore alongside the proposed rail line (Barlow, 1995), quite likely in Jakun home territory.

⁹ Swettenham was "passionately devoted to building roads and railways" (Barlow, 1995, p. 321).

¹⁰ Writing about the same trip decades later, Swettenham (1920, pp. 20-21) seems to have entirely forgotten both the elephants and the "Jacon."

The journals of 1874-1876 do mention, without commentary, a certain Selangor Raja who claimed to own three “Jacoons,” these three men having been carelessly sold by another Malay to an unnamed recipient (ibid, p. 292). In addition, as a junior official in April, 1874, Swettenham recounted being on the Perak River below Kuala Kangsar, making an official visit to Raja Ismail at Blanja. In the British party was a photographer who took a photograph of “Jacoons” at Blanja, presumably Semai, after they had been given “beads, looking glasses, etc., the things which are especially considered to delight the savage soul,” as Swettenham remarked on the event (ibid, p. 77).¹¹ In a fourth and last mention of Orang Asli in his 1874-1876 journals, Swettenham noted that in 1875 a Mandiling man captured some Orang Asli in Ulu Selangor and took them first to Slim and then further onward. Swettenham did write to J. W. W. Birch, the British euphemistic “resident” in Perak, about this misdeed (ibid, pp. 227-228).

Swettenham both described and commented elsewhere on a “young lady” he saw in the interior. Her arms were covered with numerous brass armlets, and she wore a dozen bead necklaces, also hung with brass rings, fastened with a buckle containing boar’s teeth. Through her nasal septum she had a long porcupine quill. Her face was painted in black and red stripes. “She is a belle, no doubt, and amongst the *orang Sakei*, I dare say irresistible” (Swettenham, 1880, p. 59). This occurred near Slim where Swettenham learned there were 3,000 “wild people” thereabouts and 10,000 more in the Batang Padang area of Perak. The ones he saw were “afflicted with a fearful skin disease that makes them loathsome to look at” (ibid, p. 58). It is something of an oxymoron that he considered these “wild people” to be harmless and docile (Swettenham, 1894).¹² He also noted that the Slim people were “clever gardeners” and grew sugarcane, bananas, tubers, tobacco, and other vegetables “in abundance” but wrote that they wore only a “rag” made of bark cloth (ibid, p. 89).

Swettenham further reported (1942, pp. 94-95) that in the 1880’s he gave William Cameron, brother of the *Straits Times* editor, a roving commission to explore the interior and report back to him. This Cameron did several times, accompanied by a party of “wild people.” The latter can walk long distances and “through the jungle they will carry as heavy weight as a Chinese coolie” (Swettenham, 1894, p. 89). On their last trek, Cameron found a table-land area now called Cameron Highlands. Thereafter, his mind having become deranged perhaps from fever, he was hospitalized in Singapore and there he died. In addition, Swettenham mentioned that the Sultan of Perak said that only the “Sakai” knew how to make a special glue used by the royal household to adhere gold leaf to woven sarong cloth (Swettenham, 1942, p. 119).

By 1887 Swettenham was misinforming a London audience about Orang Asli by saying that none of them existed in the area of the Straits Settlements, even though this area did then contain Orang Seletar (Singapore), Temuan (Malacca), and at least a few “Semang” (Province Wellesley).¹³ In this lecture (Swettenham, 1887), he divided the “Negritos,” into two sections, Sakai and Semang. The Sakai, he said, were of medium

¹¹ Unlike his contemporary, Hugh Clifford, who showed sympathy toward the plight of the Orang Asli in his writings (e.g., Clifford, 1916), Swettenham’s interest centered on Malay aristocrats.

¹² Swettenham rebuked a subordinate for mishandling a Malay aristocrat by saying “...you have still a great deal to learn as to the habits and modes of thought of the people amongst whom you live” (Barlow, 1995, p. 264), but Swettenham never considered that this self-education should also apply to Orang Asli.

¹³ See Logan, 1880.

height, lighter skinned than Malays, and had wavy hair. The Semang were shorter, darker, with frizzy hair. According to him, both sections were nomadic foragers and avoided all strangers, even though he himself had met up with these “savage souls.” While the “more civilized” Orang Asli lived in “wretched hovels,” others slept “on the ground or in caves,” he maintained. None had any religion or any “arts or manufactures,” he concluded (*ibid*, p. 228).¹⁴

Perhaps Swettenham was simply a careless writer about Orang Asli, but whatever the case he got most of his “facts” wrong. Indeed, already in 1880 he had reported that the Orang Asli at Slim were “clever gardeners”—hardly nomadic foragers. By the time of his London talk, he had many ways to find out that large numbers of Orang Asli were swidden farmers and orchard owners, that some had multi-family longhouses, and that the “Semang” slept on platforms.¹⁵ Furthermore, they all had a religion, although without books or bishops. Finally, Orang Asli were ingenious in manufacturing traps, snares, dart poison, and many other necessities. Swettenham’s account is therefore misleading or worse. As his biographer remarked, not without reason, Swettenham cannot “always be taken at face value” (Barlow, 1995, p. 710).

In *Malay Sketches* (1895), Swettenham mentioned Orang Asli in only one story (pp. 58, 61-64). It seems that in 1876 a “Sakai” named Pah Patin was commandeered by a Malay man, Mat Aris, to accompany him and a Malay couple on a forest track. That night in the forest, somewhere near Kota Tampan, Mat Aris killed the husband of the couple in order to obtain the wife—with the complicity of Pah Patin. Again as ordered, in the morning Pah Patin fetched two other Orang Asli and the three of them buried the husband while Mat Aris and the woman looked on. By chance, a fourth Orang Asli man quietly out hunting for gutta-percha had approached unseen that fateful night and saw the murder by the light of the campfire; he later so informed the colonial police, the story being corroborated by Pah Patin. We are not told in this story what punishment was meted out in this case or why Pah Patin and the other Orang Asli did as the Malay ordered. But it is known that Malays were accustomed to ordering Orang Asli around.

In *British Malaya* (1920, p. 24), Swettenham reviewed a 17th century report on the peninsula by the Portuguese man, Godinho, and noted that while Godinho knew the Malayan forests had tailless apes, he did not “pretend they were in any way related to the wild tribes who, he says, went about naked and resembled satyrs.” According to another passage of Godinho, the Benua were worse than naked because they transformed themselves into animals and entered villages to kill women and children. The bishop of Malacca at the time, Dom Georges, then excommunicated the Benua “tigers,” which stopped the carnage (*ibid*, p. 26). The only other mention of Orang Asli in this book is on p. 146 (*ibid*), where Swettenham stated that Malays caught Orang Asli to be slaves. However, *British Malaya* is less a history than a personal account of Swettenham’s leading role in making Malaya British (Savage and Kong, 1994).

¹⁴ Swettenham himself, however, noted in this 1887 paper that the Semang had bows and iron-tipped arrows. These were useful in the open landscapes of the lowlands, even for large game, but as the Semang were driven back into denser forest by imperialism they soon switched to blowpipes, which were more maneuverable there but less effective on large animals (S. Nagata, personal communication).

¹⁵ At least a dozen quite reliable reports existed prior to 1887 (see Lye, 2001); Swettenham would have known most of the authors.

As these reports show, Swettenham did not increase his appreciation of Orang Asli from the 1870s onward, although he did acknowledge that they were human. But from where did Swettenham and many other Victorian colonialists in Malaya derive such negligent attitudes about Orang Asli? The earliest written report that justifies regarding them as irrelevant may be that of Begbie (1834). He asserted “that the aborigines never existed in sufficient numbers to entitle them to be considered the legal proprietors of the whole extent of the peninsula.” The basis of this assertion was that they did not settle down “into any form of municipal government, being broken into small states, or rather wandering villages, acknowledging no common head” (ibid, p. 12). As the Orang Asli had no king, no tribal chieftain, no general, no lawyers, and no rich men, British officialdom could not imagine how to interact with such a non-hierarchical people.¹⁶ In present-day Malaysia this still seems to be a stumbling-block.

Beyond that, both Begbie and Swettenham had virtually no understanding of the relationship of forest clearing (for cash crops or mining) to erosion, river siltation, flooding, or the importance of mangrove areas for marine life, let alone the effect of deforestation on biodiversity (Begbie, 1834, e. g., p. 380).¹⁷ Other Europeans of that era did come to sense these relationships (Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005).¹⁸ In contrast, such ecological relationships had long been known to the forest-dwelling and coastal Orang Asli. Their livelihoods depended on that knowledge.

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¹⁶ In fact, the colonial census of 1891 did not even include Orang Asli; only Chinese, Tamils, and Malays “counted” (Shamsul, 2004).

¹⁷ Swettenham was in favor of plantations of economically useful trees in deforested areas (Kathirithamby-Wells, 2005, p. 71).

¹⁸ Even Swettenham came to deplore the aftermath of tin mining: “alluvial workings from which the ore has been removed and [pools of water] mercifully cover...this desolation of gaping holes and upturned sand” (Swettenham, 1895, p. 284).

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