

Observations on a Small Tribe of Orang Bukit, at That Time Settled and Reported on in
Perhentian Tinggi Estate, Negeri Sembilan, May-September 1896.¹

by W. R. Rowland

(translated by Margaret Kummerow)²

The tribes settled here (i.e., on Perhentian Tinggi estate) consists of twelve men, seven women, six older and five smaller children. It belongs to a larger tribe of about 200 souls, which is settled in Batang Labu, Sungei Ujong, under a batin.

The batin, who might have been able to give information on the point, was not here, and from the somewhat indefinite statements of the older men I conclude that this tribe belongs to one of the four great Sakai families, which (according to Martin Lister), coming from the mountains of Skudei, have settled in the states of Johol, Jelebu, Klang, and Sungei Ujong, and indeed, in that of S. Ujong, as from all that I could hear, they have nothing in common with the Sakais (sic. [?] Besisi) of Klang.

According to the observations made up to the present, the height of the men averages 1580 mm, of the women 1270 mm. The trunk is long, the legs short and sturdy, the arms long. The shoulders are broad, and the head normal; the face at the temples and lower jaw narrow, but broad in the middle. The color of the skin is usually 43/44 of Broca's scale; the color of the hair 41, Broca. The quantity of hair on the head is considerable, in the beard moderate, on the body scanty. The hair is certainly not generally crimped or curly, as many report; for although among the women it is usually so, among the men I found it very variable, i.e., both wavy and curly, and yet again straight, as amongst the Malays.

The color of the iris is 2/5, according to Broca. The slits of the eyes are somewhat crooked. The nose is small and pointed; the root broad, as are also the nostrils and the bridge. Seen from the side, the bridge of the nose is slightly convex, the root deep, the point slightly bent to the side.

The lips are thick; the ear small and somewhat prominent; the helix is incurved; the lobule adhesive to the head; Darwin's tip very insignificant.

The men are generally well formed; the women are remarkably small and slender as a rule. In physical strength they appear to resemble the Malays, though they may perhaps be somewhat tougher; in the handling of the chopper (parang) and adze (bliong) they are acknowledged to be the Malays' superior, though this may perhaps depend upon agility and practice rather than on actual strength. In the felling of trees they always strike the same point with the greatest precision with their heavy narrow axes. It is one of their special characteristics that they do not use the hoe in the same way as other people; instead of making the stroke and bringing back the hoe in the same direction for the next blow, they bring it back to its original position by raising it in both hands over the left temple and over the head, so that every blow gains considerably in force.

The carriage of the body is, in general, negligent; the shoulders are drawn inwards, the knees and feet turned inwards; in fact, even the strongest men afford an unedifying spectacle. In the jungle, however, they appear to greater advantage, as they are evidently more at home there. They do not strike about with the chopping knife (parang) so much as the Malays in clearing a way for themselves, but turn and wind

about with much agility in all directions, and in this way move from one spot to another very noiselessly and quickly.

In physiognomy they generally resemble the Malays so closely that one only recognizes them by their look, which is invariably one of surprise and timidity; they have besides a somewhat wilder expression than the Malays.

Their power of sight was throughout very well developed; but without having taken exact tests, nothing abnormal in this respect has struck me. The same remark applies to their sense of hearing.

I have not been able to notice any artificial deformities among them; but as natural abnormalities I might mention the unusually broad and inward-turned feet of most of the men, and the quite remarkable pigmentation of the breasts of the women. Of the seven multiparae which I had the opportunity to observe, two were already quite old and shapeless; the other five, however, were all under twenty-three, and in each of them the extraordinarily light-colored areola (Broca, about 40) covered the nipple and the greater part of the mammae like a broad flat cover. The diameter of the areola was never below 5 cm, and in some almost 10 cm.

The main illnesses are more or less malignant kinds of leprosy, some are inherited, some are acquired because the real Orang Bukit (mountain man) is not bathed except after birth and after death.

It seems that they are not very resistant against fever or other internal illnesses. When they recently came to me, it seemed that they didn't like the house provided for them. All of them had a dry, painful cough and they were running around fainthearted. No hour went by that one or the other came to me and said he would die, till I encouraged them to build their own kind of house.

I never heard anything about mental illnesses, but Malays have several. I also never heard about operations except some barbaric manipulations during childbirth. It seems, however, that their art of medicine enjoys a great reputation among the Malays. I could hardly ask about a flower, plant, or root in the jungle without getting the answer "ubat" (medicine or remedy). The Malays think the Orang Bukit have a supernatural power. This does not stop them from pulling a fast one on every occasion on these poor and harmless mountain people.

An old lady was bitten by a centipede, immediately another lady came running, put a piece of bark fiber higher up around the calf and spit on the wound vigorously.

The houses of these people are the most primitive you can imagine. As I said before, they had left the house which my people had built for them. This house was built like Malay houses for coolies, where the beds are about 1 meter above ground. Later I found them not at the edge but in the middle of the jungle. Here every man—and when he was married, together with his wife—had built a so-called pondo. These are conical, little huts at ground level. They are built of leaves from the bertam palm, 2 to 3 meters long (*Eugeissona tristis* Griff.). They put the stalks close together into the ground to form a circle of about 2 meters in diameter. The ends touch each other but they only give a meager shelter against the rain. They live in these huts under always-wet and, as we think, unhealthy conditions. When it rains hard they don't even dig a ditch around the hut to protect themselves against the running water. The strange thing was that the people in these huts recuperated from fever and cough and soon got back their harmless cheerfulness.

These pondos were situated in a group close together only some steps from the bank of a creek deep in the forest. The surroundings were covered with the leftovers of their meals and a pack of barking yellow-brownish dogs enjoyed the remnants. These dogs belonged to the most shabby kind of pariah dogs.

You can not say much about the clothing of these people. They are already too much in touch with Malays and obviously they have the urge to copy them. At home men and women wear only the sarong around the hip. When they are leaving the kampong the men wear a jacket of indeterminable origin and color, the women wear a kabayah which is held together with an ornamental brooch, exactly like the Malay women. Children of both genders are running around naked till they are 8 to 10 years of age. They only wear a string around their stomach with an amulet (if you want to call this clothing).

You see very little embellishment of the body. The reason for this is the great poverty of these people, who never will get rich. The only occasion when they could earn something would be in contact with the outside world, but then the cunning Malays fleece them mercilessly. The rule is that instead of earning some money they end up with debts. The Malays play the role of a con-man. I want to mention that these people, as well as the Malays, are very particular regarding their jewelry. You can't achieve anything here with cheap European trash, which in Africa and in other countries was so successful.

The nutrition is not a very nice but is a very big chapter. It looks like they eat really everything that they can get. They fried snakes and turtles here several times, and every day after work [on the estate] they went hunting for monkeys and little birds. They used their blowing tube (tuniang).

The way of life in such a group of people is understandably not very regular; most of the time it depends on the circumstances. Here every day they had to start work at 6 in the morning but this obligation was not very easy for them, as I noticed several times. They usually get up very early when it is still dark. Then the whole kampong goes to work, nobody stays home. The women carry their babies half on the back, half on the hip and they nurse them frequently. At the same time they hoe with the parang. Most of the older children take one of the tools and try to copy the adults. The men work very well and skillfully, but exactly as the Malays they never work till they are tired. From time to time during work they fortify themselves with sirih which they chew. Sirih they carry all the time with them. It is carried in a can which they wrap in a piece of cloth. After work they cook, eat, and hang around. In the evening regularly they played an old harmonica and they sang in deep guttural sounds. This was by no means unharmonious, some of the always-repeated melodies were appealing.

The social status of the women appears to be more independent than the status of Malay women. Most of the time the men and women are together. When a man works by himself in the field, the wife usually joins him with some shabby dogs. Most of the time couples give the impression of being happily married. This distinguishes them fundamentally from Malay couples, who never squabble with each other but pretend they hardly know each other, at least in front of us.

One can say different things about government, ownership, laws, agriculture, and livestock, but because I have so little experience with this little group, I will talk about this later.

The Orang Bukit are highly regarded as hunters. For this occupation the blowing tube (Mal., *sumpitan*) plays a major role. I initiated shooting tests and I was astonished about the certainty with which they could hit a target of 20 x 20 cm from as far as 80 meters. The *sumpitan* has been described so many times that I will not do it again. I only want to mention that these people don't blow as we do, who put our lips very close to the opening of the tube; they take the whole mouthpiece of the tube, which looks like a hollow pear, into the mouth; this means they pull the upper lip far over the mouthpiece with at least 2 cm disappearing. The lower lip is not stretched as far. It is further noticeable that they don't stretch out their arms to help to carry the tube, as we would expect with such a long tube; they hold both hands close to the mouth. Concerning craftsmanship, I only noticed that even the smallest part of the blowing tube and the quiver were decorated with carvings.

All the other tools or weapons which they carry are limited to the *bliong* (a small ax with a wooden and rattan handle), the *parang* (a long wooden knife), and the most simple kind of *kris* (dagger), of European or Malay origin. As I said before about the jewelry, I can only repeat—that cheap European knives don't find any approval even if they are nicely decorated with nickel or have other decorations.

Their relationship with religion is bad, at least from our point of view. The Orang Bukit have no temples, no holy pictures, no altars. It seems that they don't understand questions about religion, when you ask them. Several people I asked about Tuan Allah assured me that the Orang Bukit don't have one. The only celestial beings they have are their *hantus* (these are ghosts); they have these in huge amounts.

The Orang Bukit's morality has a very high reputation with the Malays. Of course, there are some cases of seduction but this only confirms the rule. They give the impression of honest and pleasant people, from all that I saw and heard about them. They live an orderly family and married life. Polygamy is a very rare exception, and people who are living in polygamy are not tolerated in the community. It seems that nobody has heard about homicide or manslaughter. Characteristically, there is a legal punishment for adultery but I don't know about any punishment for homicide. Well, good behavior is not very difficult for them, because nature gave them such a naive and harmless mind and their little contact with the world has still not damaged it. The sense of shame is obviously not very developed, at least from our point of view. The women don't see anything wrong in going around stripped to the waist when no foreigner is present. Even on the street they are topless when they are nursing.

You can't talk about a real education of the children. Like all the wild tribes, they wean their infants very late and afterwards they leave them on their own. When they can walk they go with the adults and so they learn the little that these adults know. I can not describe anything about the ceremonies of birth and marriage, because I had no opportunity to observe them. I only want to comment that I never saw anyone who was circumcised, and these people have never heard about it.

I would like to tell you about a funeral of an old woman. In all the literature I have read, I read only once about a very similar ceremony (Logan, *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*).³

A woman of about 40 years, her name was Sulam, was buried (12th of July 1897). She was little and skinny and her curly, little grayish hair was in strands. The eyes had a strange, bluish, opal sparkle on the outer edge of the iris. All old people, Orang Butik or

Malays, have this sparkle. Her husband said: "She died from fever and cough." At this moment the whole group suffers from these two illnesses. All of them are coughing and, they say, they spit blood. I personally think it is sirih. When they informed me and I came to the funeral, the woman was already dead for 8 hours; she was already stiff. She was lying in a newly built pondo. In the middle was a piece of bark, which served as a rug; on the right side of the little entrance a fire was burning, which glowed all day long; the common primitive household articles were lying and hanging around. The corpse lay on its back on one side of the hut; it was covered with a white sheet. Under the head and the feet they put pieces of wood, so they didn't lie on the ground. Her husband, a real character, was sitting apathetically next to the corpse. He had a long, black beard. His face didn't show real sadness but a certain brooding impassiveness. I came a little late at 5 o'clock in the afternoon and the people told me that it was too late for burial this day, therefore I came back the next morning at 11 o'clock. The son-in-law of the woman called me. I found the dead woman and her husband in the same position as yesterday.

At first the daughter, a knowledgeable young lady about 20 years old, and her husband, a good-looking man about the same age, carried the corpse out of the pondo. She was wearing only a piece of cloth around her hip. They put her on her back on a large piece of bark. She still didn't show any signs of decay or have a bad smell. The cheeks and the eyes were hollow, the eyes were still half open. The living Orang Bukit have a very slight pigmentation on their palms and soles. I noticed that the skin of these parts of the corpse were now white like milk, which I hadn't noticed before when she still was living.

Now several children and women brought receptacles, made of coconut shells, containing water, and the daughter of the woman and an old lady started to clean the corpse thoroughly. I noticed that both women worked with great sensitivity; for example, they never exposed the genitals of the corpse. To wash them they moistened the loincloth from the outside and lifted it up only a little bit to pour water underneath. When they started, the younger of the two ladies put her sarong around her hip. Usually the women cover their breasts with it, at least when I'm nearby. If foreigners are present, they never uncover their breasts. Later somebody told me that this is a sign of trust.

After they washed the corpse, they combed the hair. Through the commonly worn mop of hair on the back of the head, they put a silver hairpin, which her husband had to get from his sirih box. The daughter then called one of the children standing around who brought her a piece of yellowish (curcum-like) root. She squashed it a little and painted crosses on her mother's palms and soles, which left a yellow trace. They explained to me that if the dead woman wakes up in her grave and looks at her hands and feet, she recognizes that she really died. This is the adat (law), they said. Then the husband and the daughter laid the corpse on top of a mat, which was positioned on top of a long piece of bark. The husband closed her eyes, not without respect, crossed her arms on top of her chest and positioned her head so that she looked straight upward. Then on top of her body they put two long, white pieces of cloth. The son-in-law cut a hole into the lower sheet with the parang and explained to me that he had done this so she could breathe. In the upper sheet they didn't cut a hole. They rolled up the bark on top of the corpse and tied it together twice with rattan, and two men carried it to the grave, which other people, deep in the jungle, had dug in a clearing they had made for this purpose.

The hole was almost 1 meter deep, noticeably long and narrow. On the left side, which was deeper, laid the dug-up earth in a long heap. Two strong beams—which were put one over the other—and two smaller posts kept the earth away from the hole.

They laid the corpse on the bare soil after they removed the bark, and they put her on the higher side of the hole. Her husband and her son-in-law took her by the shoulders and the feet, and another man supported her head; in this way they put her in her grave with her face up. The feet pointed to the west and the heap of earth stayed to her right side next to the hole. Next to her on her left side was still enough room to bury a second person of the same height.

The husband crouched down at the foot of the grave. Out of a sirih box he took half a dozen of little, thin, silver rings and brooches, which the Sakai women enjoy wearing on the kabayah. One of the rings he gave to a young man, her son. The others he put together with the sirih box and some sirih leaves on top of her chest. Later he took the last two away and laid them next to her left hand.

Next to the grave were lying a lot of 1-meter-long pointed pegs. Now those present put these pegs next to the hole, so that they built a sloping peg-roof; on top of this roof they put bark. During this procedure several of the people, including all the women, took some soil in their hands, rubbing it and cautiously dropping it between the pegs next to the corpse.

They observed carefully that nowhere was an opening and that everything was well covered with bark. Then three men, one of them the husband of the dead woman, threw soil into the grave; for this they used hoes and then they stamped the soil with their feet. When a little mound started to form, they took one of the beams, which I described before, placed it on the right side on the foot-end of the grave and cut a shorter piece for the head-end. Everything was held in place by short pegs. In between these pegs, as in a three-sided frame of beams, they piled up the earth as one commonly does. The foot-end of the grave didn't have such a barrier.

Before they had put the corpse into the grave, her husband had put a rachis (shaft) of a bertram palm straight into the corner on the right side of her head. Into the bark roof they had cut a slit just for this palm shaft, and even when they had finished you could see how the shaft jutted about a foot over the mound. This was a sign that the woman had died of her own illness and that none of her children or relatives had the same illness. They removed very carefully all the leaves and pieces of wood from the mound. On two big leaves they put two meals of cooked rice, one down at the foot of the mound, the other in the middle. One was for the woman herself and the other one was for the hantus (ghosts) of her parents and relatives, who would come to visit her. On the head- and on the foot-end of the grave they stuck in a plain peg, as in the Malay graves. These pegs were connected through a strip of white cloth. This is the adat (law), otherwise I couldn't find out anything about it.

It only remains to say that the Orang Bukit now speak, almost without exception, Malay. You can recognize them without doubt by their face and their look, but when they open their mouth, you know they are not Malays. The accent is completely different. They speak with sounds deep in their throats and perhaps they remind you at the speech of the people from Java. In contrast to the Malays, who don't pronounce the K at the end of a word, they pronounce it sharply, which reminds one of the Battaks from Sumatra.

With this I'm coming to the end of my notes; I'm still occupied with numerous and detailed measurements and I hope that I can publish these and other observations at a later time.

Notes

¹ This article, written in German by W. R. Rowland (in Seremban, Sungei Ujong), was originally published in *Mitteilungen der kaiserlich-königlich Geographischen Gesellschaft, in Wien 41 (10-11): 706-713, 1898* under the title “Bemerkungen über einen kleinen Stamm von Orang Bukit, zur Zeit angesiedelt beobachtet auf Perhentian Tingi Estate, Negri Sembilan, Mai-September 1896.”

² The first ten paragraphs of this article were translated in W. Skeat and C. Blagden, *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula*, v. 1, London: MacMillan, 1906, 69-70. The title was translated in Lye Tuck-Po, *Orang Asli of Peninsula Malaysia: A Comprehensive and Annotated Bibliography*, Kyoto, Japan: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 2001, 100.

³ The following information on a grave ritual was paraphrased in W. Skeat and C. Blagden, *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula*, v. 2, 1906, 100-105.