

# *Spirituality and Sustainability*

EXPERIENCES OF  
THE INTERNATIONAL  
ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

Edited by

Abdul Rashid Moten

With a foreword by Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abdul Razak,  
Rector, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)



IIUM



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CHAPTER 13

***Orang Asli* Living Cultural  
Heritage: The Jungle  
School Gombak, Malaysia**

Norzalifa Zainal Abidin



*Orang Asli* are the indigenous people of the Peninsular Malaysia. The term *Orang Asli* is synonymous with *Orang Asal* or original people. *Orang Asli* groups in Peninsular Malaysia are considered minorities in the multi-ethnic country. There are eighteen dissimilar cultural linguistic groups or tribes of *Orang Asli*. Most of them speak the Mon–Khmer language, which is an evidence of their ancient connection with the motherland. The Gombak *Orang Asli* community is unique in that nine out of the total of eighteen tribes live together in the area. However, the cultural heritage of the indigenous *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia is dying. This is an observation that has become more significant over the years. The present challenges of the *Orang Asli* in Gombak are related to the diminishing of their cultural heritage and traditional skills, their socio-economy and the misconception about modernisation efforts for the urban poor amongst them.

Since 1992, there have been numerous efforts by different NGOs, individuals and universities to assist the government of Malaysia in conducting activities engaging the *Orang Asli* communities around Peninsular Malaysia. Beginning in 2011, more individuals and NGOs became involved with these community engagements. However, these attempts were “one-off” in nature – not consistent and never sustained. The social and economic challenges facing the *Orang Asli* community should be addressed in a coordinated manner to ensure more lasting impacts in order to sustain the cultural heritage of this community. In an effort to sustainably advocate, enhance and replenish the rich cultural heritage of *Orang Asli*, Jungle School Gombak (JSG), formed in 2014, works to assist the indigenous community in educating their young, as it informs other Malaysians as well as international visitors about *Orang Asli* culture. The *Orang Asli* community has very intimate symbiotic relationship with jungle environments. JSG helps the *Orang Asli* convey this intimacy through their indigenous cultural and living heritage, survival skills and their various talents, such as weaving, *Kerchang* puzzle, traditional fire making, fishing and artistic craftsmanship. Sustainable approaches such as those by JSG should be realised and implemented within the indigenous community members, in addition to external interventions to empower the *Orang Asli* to be more independent.



Islam teaches caring for the poor. It is this teaching that moved the authors to embark on their proactive steps to form JSG in their efforts to help the underprivileged *Orang Asli* communities of Malaysia. The formation of JSG is an example of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* in action, in that it works towards *hikmah* (wisdom), *'illah* (effective cause) and *maṣlahah* (interest or benefits) for the communities. This chapter is a narrative of the contemporary problems challenging the *Orang Asli* of Peninsular Malaysia, and of the efforts taken at resolving the problems to better enable the indigenous community to retain their heritage. The chapter presents JSG's conceptual master plan that serves as an impetus for further and lasting coordinated interventions which are impactful and beneficial for this community. The master plan was formulated in line with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals to systematically address issues confronting the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia and elsewhere, through various collaborative efforts and coordination amongst *Orang Asli* communities and various stakeholders. JSG is involved in several coordinated efforts for more sustainable community activities to empower *Orang Asli* people and to make them more independent in fulfilling their education, cultural heritage, social and economic needs. JSG plans to showcase the true talents of *Orang Asli* communities who have been using a sustainable approach in their livelihood and in the care of the environment for a long time.

### **The Background to *Orang Asli* in Gombak**

Gombak is a district in Selangor, one of the most advanced states of Malaysia and situated on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The unique demographic data of the *Orang Asli* in Gombak serves as a good platform for the Jungle school to revive and promote this rich cultural heritage, which is now dying. There are about eighteen tribes of *Orang Asli* with a total population of 180,000 in the peninsular. Through interviews with villagers in Gombak, the authors found out that about nine out of the eighteen tribes live here. Table 13.1 shows the breakdown of the nine tribes.

The unique distribution of the *Orang Asli* community of Gombak was due to the formation of the *Sen Oi Praaq* troops of selected *Orang Asli* jungle experts and trekkers. This was prior to independence, when the British were at war with the Communists. The families of the selected *Sen Oi Praaq* were purposely brought to Gombak, Selangor and the first *Hospital Orang Asli* was built. Juliet Bedford (2009:25) states that the Gombak Hospital, became the

hub of the Medical Division of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli, henceforth referred to as JHEOA) is an awkward paradox for the Malaysian Government. The Medical Division represents the schism between the government's desire to assimilate the *Orang Asli* into mainstream Malaysian (specifically Malay) society, and their assumed interest in responsibly providing for the *Orang Asli* as the indigenous minority of Peninsular Malaysia.

Table 13.1: The *Orang Asli* community in Gombak, Selangor.

Tribes	Number of Families
<i>Temuan</i>	60
<i>Semai</i>	50
<i>Temiar</i>	40
<i>Jakun</i>	10
<i>Semelai</i>	10++
<i>Che Wong</i>	4
<i>Mahmeri</i>	3
<i>Jahut</i>	2
<i>Jaha</i>	2

The *Orang Asli* hospital is still in operation under the Ministry of Health, Government of Malaysia. The *Museum Orang Asli* was constructed in 1986 as a mark of the cultural living heritage site in Gombak and to showcase *Orang Asli* indigenous cultures. With these two significant landmarks, JSG aims to enhance the village as a UNESCO heritage site. JSG was founded by the authors to assist the *Orang Asli* community in enhancing their cultural values and embedding the knowledge of their cultural heritage into future generations. JSG conducts interviews and discussions with villagers of the area on how best to address the challenges confronting the *Orang Asli* community, vis-à-vis their education, socio economy, dying cultural heritage and misconceptions about modernisation. It was in 2011, the authors first collaborated with Raman Bah Tuin, a *Semai* arts and crafts master and a village member. From that time, data collections through a series of interviews with the *Orang Asli* urban poor community began, and continues to the present day. This *Orang Asli* community has been living in Gombak for the past 48 years. The distribution of the *Orang Asli* community is as shown in Table 13.2.



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# *Spirituality and Sustainability*

## EXPERIENCES OF

### THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

The International Islamic University Malaysia has, since 2018, redoubled its struggle to restore its wisdom, strengths, and dignity and promote comprehensive excellence. Hence, the University adopted the United Nations' sustainable development agenda as a complement to the University's vision and mission of Islamisation, Integration, Internationalisation and Comprehensive Excellence.

The book explains the ways in which the SDGs will provide a new strategy to apply the concept of Islamisation, which has long been the foundation of the IIUM. Consequently, the university's operations and facilities have been adjusted so that they become mediums in applying and showcasing a lifestyle that is sustainable. Everything in the university i.e. the curricular and extra-curricular courses, the research activities, and everyday operations in administrative offices and other places are geared towards sustainable development in line with the maqāṣid al-sharī'ah. Elements of sustainability are integrated in every aspect of the university's administration and, indeed, in teaching, research and community engagement. Consequently, the IIUM has adopted "Humanising Higher Education through maqāṣid al-sharī'ah and SDGs" as its official strategic mission.

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