

## Orang Asli Talks in Akiya's *Tuntut*

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### ABSTRAK

*Penerbitan antologi cerpen Tuntut (2001) karya Akiya adalah peristiwa yang penting kepada jati diri masyarakat Orang Asli. Judul Tuntut sendiri jelas bermaksud 'menuntut' sesuatu yang pernah dan berhak diwarisi Orang Asli. Yang termuat dalam karya Akiya ialah beberapa persoalan ideologi yang ingin diketengahkan ke dalam arus perdana melalui beberapa 'suara' yang sekian lama terpinggir. Orang ramai lebih suka melihat jati diri Orang Asli sebagai yang statik, tetapi tidak 'lapuk' oleh perubahan masa. Orang Asli lazim dilihat tidak lebih daripada sekumpulan manusia dari masa lampau yang tidak signifikan langsung kepada masyarakat yang dominan. Rencana ini mencadangkan naratif dalam Tuntut adalah kritikal untuk memperjuangkan suara-suara daripada masyarakat dan Orang Asli demi memantapkan jati diri mereka. Sehubungan itu, adalah penting untuk kita menilai sejauh mana karya Akiya ini jujur dan adil di dalam melakarkan representasi masyarakatnya.*

*Key words: Suara, voyage-in, tuntutan semula, subaterniti, totalisasi*

### ABSTRACT

*The publication of the anthology of Tuntut (2001) by Akiya marks an important development for the identity of the Orang Asli's community for reasons that will be discussed in this paper. The meaning of Tuntut is 'to reclaim' and immediately implicates ideological reading in the anthology. In literary practice, Tuntut has become the medium for Orang Asli 'voices' to reach out beyond their 'silent' settlements to a culturally diverse Malaysian readership. There is the tendency to take the identities of the Orang Asli for granted. Also, Orang Asli seems to be sustained in our social memory as one of our 'dormant' and 'distant' relatives. This paper proposes that the narratives are critical in order for Orang Asli to make an authentic articulation of their identities. Ultimately, it is important that we know how and how much has Akiya succeeded in making a judicious representation of Orang Asli through selected narratives to resist the temptation of totalisation against their identities.*

*Keywords: Voices, voyage-in, reclaim, subalterneity, totalisation*

## INTRODUCTION

The general aim of this paper is to explore selected narratives of *Tuntut* (2001), the first anthology by an *Orang Asli* writer, Akiya @ Mahat anak Cina, of the Semai tribe. Written in Malay, *Tuntut* has been immediately recognized as the bearer of authentic *Orang Asli* voice emerging after a long silence. Its arrival is deeply symbolic and sensational. In Malay, *tuntut* means ‘to (re)claim’, communicating to the wider audience a sense of urgency underlining a mission or task at hand. But, what is it that it seeks to (re)claim? Simply put, it is their identity and their voices that they wish to project to non-*Orang Asli* communities. The intention here is not to imply a strong sense of antagonism between *Orang Asli* and non-*Orang Asli* anymore than to describe it as a relation of powers. This author believes that *Orang Asli* identity, and more importantly their voices and echoes, have been directly or indirectly marginalized across various cultural, political and economic spheres. This brings up the contention that culturally – culture being the scope of this paper – they have struggled to exist under a relative condition of subalterneity, which can mean that they have not been fully able to position themselves and speak without the dominant counter-discourse, always intervening and consequently determining their identity for them. The time has come for *Orang Asli* to impress upon the Other the importance of their voices, and construct and determine, albeit through literary narratives, their *Orang Asli*-ness.

## THE ‘OTHER’ AND DISTORTED IMAGINATION

The narratives of *Tuntut* should be read in the context of the construction of distorted imagination by the *other* (read the non-*Orang Asli* who are party to unfair construction and asymmetric discourse), which have been impressed upon *Orang Asli* identities. As aptly claimed by Colin Nicholas (2000), the discourse of knowledge about *Orang Asli* has always been determined, with disturbing effects, by the ruling power, instead of the *Orang Asli* themselves. The managing of knowledge about *Orang Asli* communities is partly achieved through the reductionistic construction of their identities. *Orang Asli* is a generic term “given” by the government in 1960 “to forge a common identity among the *Orang Asli* subgroups” (Nicholas 2000: 7). However, the unfair act of homogenizing the indigenes has denied each distinctive *Orang Asli* community of its identity and due recognition. They were commonly and probably still are, referred to as “aborigines” and *sakai*, which means “slave” and is a popular term among the Malays. There are also other terms that according to Colin Nicholas (2000: 6) are clearly derogatory, used to describe the “natural-ness” of *Orang Asli*, such as *Orang Liar* (wild people), *Orang Mawas* (ape-like people) and *Orang Jinak* (tame or enslaved people).

It is important to note that crude constructs such as these have been used to stigmatise Orang Asli, and more significant than that, such 'knowledge' is effectual in any attempt to manage their identities. More poignantly, Orang Asli are already handicapped by constitutional definition, and are deprived of salient identifiers such as religion, language, culture, place of birth and lineage. This marginalization also denies Orang Asli any possible 'breadth' and 'depth', leaving them in a state of stasis and paralysis. Other on-going 'management' programmes for the indigenes involve their integration into mainstream society. Sothi Rachagan (Lim Teck Ghee & Gomes, A. G. 1993: 176) reveals that the integration agenda is an attempt by the ruling power to 'water down' Orang Asli-ness by 'inculcating' in them the values of the Other. Rachagan thinks they will gradually become 'extinct' through this process of assimilation. The irony is that although Orang Asli are to be assimilated into the larger community, such as the Malay ethnic group, much thought is given to them by their ethnic cousins. We only have to ask ourselves when the last time was when we thought or talked about or had anything to do with Orang Asli?

In principle, regardless of the range of answers to the above question, the point that must be driven home is that there is a denial in our social memory that generates a 'palimpsestic' portrait of the indigene Orang Asli. As a result, Orang Asli identities become invisible in general, and when not, they are proclaimed to be intolerable, recalcitrant, distant and dormant. They are victims of *amnesia* and *erasure*, because they are of no importance to the Other. Orang Asli, however, do not take these ill consequences to be their 'fair share' or their destiny; but are instead showing a strong determination not to be repeatedly 'written off' like a palimpsest. As ancient but not extinct people, Orang Asli have mustered enough strength to write themselves back into contention from the cultural and intellectual wilderness.

The erasure of their identities is resisted in Akiya's narratives, through which a deafening cacophony of voices from the hinterlands is unleashed. Akiya's *Tuntut* can become the medium for Orang Asli voices to reach beyond their silent settlements to a culturally diverse Malaysian readership. This can be done if and when these voices manage the *voyage-in* from the margin, as suggested by Edward Said (1993), towards the mainstream community of non-Orang Asli. In fact, the narratives are an authentic articulation of their identities and are critical to the endeavour by Orang Asli to break their silence, and to make the *voyage-in* to impregnate the centre.

## THE TOOL THAT TALKS

Being considered being anti-developmental, apathetic and fatalistic, a situation worsened by minimized self-representation, the Orang Asli has almost become the ideal subaltern. Having said that, one should remember the notion and the

varying degree of subalterneity are relative to the actual condition of the marginalized. Indeed, Orang Asli should set about ‘measuring’ the degree of their subalterneity, and once they have done that, they should activate a sense of agency within themselves. Agency, voice, self-representation, self-narration are necessary to any (subaltern) subject who wishes to ‘talk back’ to the dominant Other.

The tool that empowers Orang Asli to ‘talk back’ can be appropriated from Edward Said’s notion of the ‘voyage-in’. *Voyaging-in* is the modus operandi of Akiya’s journey into the non-Orang Asli dominant discourse. According to Said (1993: 261), the voyage-in “is an effort or struggle carried out by ‘scholars, critics and intellectuals’ in the peripheral world”. Akiya fits into this description, because his narratives are realistic, unbiased and non-reactionary, and yet critical issues on ethnicity, land and gender for the discerning reader-critic are woven into the texts. The narratives attempt to resist the homogenizing or totalizing tendency encouraged by the structure of ‘official’ discourses. Resistance, though brewed in one’s blood, should not always be bloody or traumatic. In Said’s terms “it is a conscious effort to enter into the [dominant] discourse, powered and facilitated by the might of the [Malay] language, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories” (1993: 260).

In making the voyage-in, the narratives will to some degree disrupt the worldview of the dominant hegemonic culture. The *voyage-in* will become an important strategy for Orang Asli, particularly for someone like Akiya, whose struggle is conducted mainly through literary device, to reconceptualise their historical identities, which have suffered the distorting imagination of their counterparts. The duty to reclaim is, in essence, something that must be taken up by the marginalized. The voyage-in becomes a symbol of this ‘rescue’ exercise of recovering suppressed voices and discarding a static sense of identity. Thus, it is a voyage of both begotten and forgotten voices.

The voyage-in, according to Said, is “the work of intellectuals from the colonial or peripheral regions who wrote in an ‘imperial’ language, who felt themselves organically related to the mass resistance to empire, and who set themselves the revisionist, critical task of dealing frontally with the metropolitan culture, using the techniques, discourses, and weapons of scholarship and criticism once reserved exclusively for the Europeans” (1993: 293). Writing back at the empire is a major experience or process of the voyage-in. It is necessary to position Akiya as the voyager making a journey into the metropolitan empire.

#### VOICES EN-VOYAGE

In his introduction to *Tuntut*, Wan Zawawi Ibrahim (2001) writes that unlike other established Orang Asli intellectuals, Akiya has chosen the literary

approach to represent his views and that of his people on the discourse of Orang Asli identities. Consequently, Wan Zawawi Ibrahim (2001: xxviii) has concluded that this important anthology is a genuine social narrative of Orang Asli identities from within their inner sanctum. Extremely few writers in Malaysia writes creatively and critically about Orang Asli, save the likes of Ishak Haji Muhammad and Zailani Taslim whose novels on Orang Asli exhibits at best only the most minimal Malay myopia. Hence, this article will attempt to 'fix' whatever 'malaise' or 'myopia' that may have surfaced by letting it submerged under the voyaging voices of the Orang Asli, by analyzing three selected stories from the anthology – *Tuntut*, *Tanah* and *Gingong*.

*TUNTUT: GENDER AND ORANG ASLI*

As the first story in the anthology, *Tuntut* delivers a dramatic surprise because it practically subverts all the typical, run-of-the-mill 'whining' and connotations often associated with 'claims' made by the indigenes to the Other. This effort by Akiya, who is Orang Asli himself, to change our mental construct regarding all things connected to Orang Asli issues is remarkable, incredible and praiseworthy. The story *Tuntut* places the emphasis on the relation between gender and *Orang Asli*ness. Few of us would ever consider the situation described in *Tuntut* where an Orang Asli woman resists the ubiquitous norms of her patriarch. It takes a commendable measure of intellectual commitment for Akiya to leap over the 'mainstream' interests traditionally voiced in Orang Asli discourse, such as poverty, landlessness or education. Akiya seems to be asking his own people to be critical and creative as they make the voyage-in so as to deny the prospect of the highly damaging fossilization of issues by the dominant centre. While Orang Asli want their voices to be heard repeatedly, it is feared that their echoes will reverberate only in deaf ears, always in the back of the mind and always latent. But, as far as the 'reclaiming' of indigenous (read 'alternative') voices is concerned, *Tuntut* is refreshingly extraordinary, and perhaps unthinkable, if not unspeakable to both dominant and peripheral centres.

Gender, rather than sex, is the preferred term of reference, because the protagonist in *Tuntut*, Wah Tipah, is facing a predicament that stems from her identity not as a woman, but as a widowed woman. Immediately, we see that the discourse is cultural rather than sexual, since gender refers to man or woman as identities constructed by their common culture, and not by his or her sex. While the mother of two is still youthful and beautiful, the fact remains that Wah Tipah's desirability (read 'predicament') in the eyes of men is likely to be attributed to her gender, rather than her physical attributes. Wah Tipah is widowed when her husband, Sarjan Hamid, was killed in an ambush during the communist insurgency. Despite her loss, this educated woman is determined to be as independent as she can be, because she had promised her husband that she would raise their children herself if something bad should happen to him. Her

intention however, does not sit well with her husband's family, because it is against the 'norms'. It is customary, as Akiya informs us, for any male member of the family of the deceased – whose name was Hamid – to make a 'claim' on his surviving wife. Hamid has two brothers who are unmarried and either of them is eligible, if he is willing and able, to take Wah Tipah's hand in marriage. This is sanctioned by their culture. However, either one of them can be her husband only if she gives her consent. If she marries one of her husband's brothers, she will probably have a better future. Hamid's family wants to continue this tradition, not only because they know that it is prevalent in their community, but more than anything else, because they want to help her raise her children, Ana and Jamil. The children must know where they belong and who their kinsmen are.

Wah Tipah knows that both Hashim, the younger brother or Uda, the elder brother, can claim the right to 'reclaim' her. She also knows that Hashim has set his eye on her and is eager to 'exercise' his rights on her. At this point, it is important to note that Orang Asli culture, as far as Akiya has demonstrated through his anthology, is not one that is inclined to discriminate against the female gender. In reality, it is relatively magnanimous to women. The case of Wah Tipah highlights the fact that a widow has a choice either to remain a single parent or return to the fold of her husband's family for comfort and security. Wah Tipah cannot be forced to make her decision, which must be respected once her mind is made up.

It is Uda who maturely and quite sensibly informs his family that although it is a *bona-fide* practice, it is no longer suitable or applicable in the modern day. Although Wah Tipah finds it hard to believe that her husband's family actually wants to place her within this 'cultural framework', Akiya does little in giving her any voice of resistance. We get to know her thoughts, but we do not see her putting up a meaningful defence. Wah Tipah does not seem to have much of a say (nor does she say much!) and lacks confidence, despite being intelligent enough to know what is going on. The irony between her apathetic representation and Akiya's own commitment towards gender representation within the Orang Asli community is interesting to experience. If not for Uda's maturity, for he is aware of Wah Tipah's worldview because he is also a teacher like her, she would probably have been helplessly torn apart in silence. Both Uda and Wah Tipah know that the world beyond their village is encroaching quickly and unstopably on them.

Modernity has, through its 'agents' – a term to be carefully interpreted here – made important inroads in gradually accommodating the changing mindscapes of the indigenes. In the end, Wah Tipah and her husband's family reach a mutual agreement that effectively vindicates her from the stifling norm of her people. The story *Tuntut* is not in any way be misunderstood as a critique of feminism. The notion of emancipation or conversely, double-colonisation, is not relevant here.

## TANAH: LAND AND ORANG ASLI

Orang Asli identity, like many of their indigenous cousins at home in Malaysia as well as in other lands, is reflected in their relationship with the land. To be exact, their identity is defined by the sense of belonging to the ancestral land. This means that in contradistinction to the modern and Western conception that construes man as the ultimate and legitimate 'lord' of his land, Orang Asli communities regard their land as sacred. Like the Australian aborigines, Orang Asli in Malaysia believes that they are 'children' of the land. This special notion of ownership of the land is herewith given a brief discussion.

Orang Asli communities see themselves as belonging to their land, meaning that they are 'owned' by their land on which ancestral families had cultivated and foraged. This worldview is reiterated quite succinctly by Romeli Dollah (Wan Zawawi Ibrahim 1998: 4), who states that 'Orang Asli believe that land is God-given and a living [thing] and as such, it is able to produce resources of food and life'. In support of that, Wan Zawawi Ibrahim also mentions that 'for Orang Asli, their spiritual and cultural identity is intricately tied to a pre-colonial (pre-capitalist) notion of land, the concept of *tanah saka* (ancestral land)'. It is against the aforementioned knowledge that *Tanah*, one of the key texts in *Tuntut*, must make the *voyage-in* because Akiya's intention to make Orang Asli voices heard beyond the distant hills would otherwise fail.

*Tanah* as story relates the importance the land holds for Jantan, an Orang Asli who owns a piece of land that is overgrown with bushes. Although the prime of his life is mostly spent working and looking after his family in Kuala Lumpur, Jantan is always thinking about ways to utilize the land 'given' to him by his uncle. He regards the 'gift' from his uncle and realizes the responsibility that comes along with it – "*Tanah ini aku serahkan kepada mu. Belalah tanah ini*" (Wan Zawawi 1998: 40) – which literally means "I give you this land. So look after it".

Thus etched and sealed in less than 10 words in the Malay language is the exchange of ownership, or rather the passing down of inheritance, between two men of the same blood. Because *Orang Asli* are traditionally 'oral' communities, contracts and commitments undertaken amongst them, whether for social or filial reasons, are done verbally. Akiya remembers this characteristic of his cultural tradition in *Tanah*. Even though Jantan, the protagonist, is a literate white-collar supervisor, he never complains about the validity of his uncle's words. Clearly, Jantan is quite proud to be Orang Asli. Although he may have obvious advantages over his village kinsmen intellectually, economically and through his experiences, he takes great pride in inheriting his ancestral land, and shows a strong belief in his traditional culture and the way things are done. There is no direct or indirect indication that he is worried about the ephemeral nature of the verbal contract because that is how things should be done. He receives the gift in an emotional manner, weeping with joy. The occasion marks

a most critical phase in the consolidation of Jantan's identity as an indigene. He has become a landowner. Such is the magnitude of the occasion.

Jantan's happiness is nevertheless short-lived, and ends when he learns that his land has been sold without his consent and knowledge by his cousin brother, Bah Jua. It is not too difficult for Jantan to figure out why Bah Jua, in all his myopia, dares to sell it for a very low price to the Chinese businessman, Ah Tong. Like many others, Bah Jua is heavily indebted to the Chinese towkay. On this note, it is vital especially for Orang Asli scholars, activists, sympathizers and Malaysian society at large, to recognize that hardcore poverty has been responsible for the indigenous folks selling off their land titles. So, besides losing their land in the name of modernity or development, Orang Asli are also forced to give up their ancestral lands to shrewd businessmen, such as Ah Tong, who pays a meagre sum of RM1000 to Bah Jua for a prime piece of land that is spacious, fertile and accessible, but that does not belong to him. Ah Tong's friendly business style has actually encouraged the villagers to come to him because he allows them to buy their groceries on credit terms. Eventually, Ah Tong becomes the most powerful person in the village – ruling over his debt-laden 'natives', who are at once his hegemonic subjects as well as his displaced 'fugitives'. Therefore, *Tanah* enables Akiya to contextualize the symbolism and significance of indigenous land and the need for its preservation against the onslaught of social and economic dynamics.

Now, more than ever, the pressure is on Jantan – the word incidentally has several connotations in Malay language such as 'male/man', 'manly', 'masculine' or 'a brave man' – to restore, or rather reclaim, his pride as the rightful guardian of his land that is now possessed, perhaps along with other indigeneous lands, by the Shylock-like Ah Tong. Jantan also wants to exercise his rights as sanctioned by Orang Asli traditional customs to seek justice against the malicious 'crime' of doublecross by his own kinsmen, Bah Jua. Much to his frustration, Jantan unravels the ugly secret that the uncle who installed him as the inheritor of the ill-fated land – Bah Jua's father – is actually the master conniver behind the land scandal. For a commission of RM300, he has sold his soul to the devil, as it were. The most interesting thing in this story is probably not about the act of reclaiming the land from towkay Ah Tong, but the idea of seeking justice and redemption through the system of consensual and transparent accountability that exists within Orang Asli traditional culture. No matter how 'modernised' he is than the others, Jantan will always return to his cultural system simply because it is the fairest system; there is given the circumstances, despite the prevalent rule of laws governing the country at large.

Although Jantan successfully reclaims his land from Ah Tong, Akiya's story demonstrates a changing paradigm in how Orang Asli identity is understood and debated. Jantan, though restored to the rank of landlord, contemplates whether or not he still has the enthusiasm and energy to clear the densely bushed land. He is clearly not sure about what he wants to do with this

piece of land that he had recently fought so hard to regain. Perhaps, the downshift in Jantan's attitude is linked to a sense of alienation or a state of shock because psychologically, he is not prepared to undergo – to appropriate Shamsul A. B.'s (Wan Zawawi Ibrahim 1998: 9) concept – 'the everyday-defined' experiences of his kinsmen in Kg. Sungai Kapor. Modernity has changed Jantan's priorities and somewhat made him more mature, as can be seen in his manner of approaching the land crisis. Jantan accomplishes his mission and that in itself is a form of redemption for neglecting his duty to his culture and identity.

#### GINGONG: THE ORANG ASLI AND ARTISTIC CULTURE

In *Gingong*, the future of Orang Asli artistic culture is examined through their musical instrument called *gingong*. Atuk Bait is perhaps the sole man in his village who still plays the *gingong*, which is categorically a woodwind variety. Atuk Bait who is now in his 80s realises that many of his much younger kinsmen are more interested in popular modern music. Johan, his grandson, once told him that their people were not keen on the sound of *gingong*. Bah Bait realises that his people are gradually reinterpreting their own cultural tradition with the new knowledge that they have learnt from their interaction with the outside world. What saddens him is that his people are overly hasty in interpreting their own culture. This new knowledge is colonizing young people such as Johan, rushing to stereotype *gingong*, *pensol* and the like as outdated or '*kuno*' (its equivalent Malay word) and primitive. For Johan and his band of young musicians, *gingong* has had its days of glory and must now make way for modern music. Blinded by his disdain for indigenous forms of music, Johan goes on to prevent his grandfather from participating in the annual celebration of cultures known as the 'Malaysia Fest' held in Kuala Lumpur.

For Akiya, this story presents the prevalent scenario in Orang Asli communities in general, where cultural conflicts are rampant between old people like Bah Bait, Bah Tupat, Bah Ngah and Bah Anai, who are all faithful to their traditional music, and the generation of young kings of pop and rock-and-roll. Feeling displeased and displaced, Bah Bait enters the dark world of the 'silenced', for he is like a maestro of mute music, and has lost his audience. Through Akiya, Bah Bait speaks to mainstream society about the cultural transition that his society, the Semai tribe, is going through. He speaks through the faint melody of *gingong* about the price of progress, the loss of the young as future bearers of their indigenous culture, and of his single-minded enthusiasm for the survival of traditional arts. For Bah Bait, Orang Asli identity lies in their cultural pride, which is being replaced by a feeling of shame for being a part of that culture. As Bah Bait's hope to reclaim the sound of *gingong* and ultimately restore Orang Asli traditional music to its rightful place steadily fades away, he decidedly follows his cue and exits into his inner-self, into a faraway country, as it were.

At this point, Bah Bait's 'journey of withdrawal' unexpectedly halts when an American student of anthropology suddenly knocks on his door. In my opinion, whether or not Akiya is aware of the implication of such event, the meeting between Bah Bait of Kampung Changkat Selarung and Marina Roseman of Cornell University is most interesting for at least three reasons. First, Bah Bait's musical wilderness is effectively ended because of Roseman's timely intervention, which proves to be a huge moral boost for the Orang Asli cultural identity. Second, it takes a non-*Orang Asli* and a foreigner to revive the art of playing *gingong*, instead of the Semai people themselves. Third, this meeting rekindles the classic 'anthropological' adventure of the colonial days, when the native met the colonial white man.

Does Akiya intend to direct sarcasm at Orang Asli for forgetting their culture and traditions and for leaving the responsibility of learning and preserving their tradition to Western anthropologists such as Roseman? Her presence among the Temiars is a glimpse of the old colonial days not only in this land, but also everywhere else, where Western orientalist-cum-anthropologist search for indigenous knowledge. The point that must be driven home is that it is the like of Roseman who will have the knowledge of *gingong* and consequently haul it home to Cornell to be 'colonialised'. This is the prospect that stems from the neglect of and the ignorance of culture that indigenes as well as non-indigenes are guilty of.

The construction of 'the colonial knowledge' in Shamsul A.B.'s (2003: 47) terms, is more often than not the result of the 'academic' ventures of Western enthusiasts such as Marina Roseman. She will ironically be the spokesperson possessing a huge advantage over the subject of her study, the latter of whom must sadly remain merely represented. In fact, Bah Bait is obviously smitten by Roseman, the white colonial figure from the past. She effectively reminds him of his old white colonial master, Tuan Harry, whom he used to serve. Bah Bait all too readily retrieves his *gingong* and plays it again to the delight of his white visitor, and the sweet lullaby inevitably makes him ecstatic. Both host and guest achieve what was not possible before. Thus, the relation of power is changed – Bah Bait, the host and holder of Semai epistemological knowledge now becomes the observed, the obliging entertainer *par excellence* before the white muse. *Gingong* is an important story in terms of its theme – the impact of modernity and globalism on the attitude and culture of the Semai nation – as well the underlying implication, namely the loss of indigenous knowledge, including the 'know-what', 'know-how' and 'know-why' to the foreign or colonialist anthropologist. The implications of such a postcolonial reading of this story should be especially important for an Orang Asli emissary-writer such as Akiya.

As the foremost literary voice of Orang Asli, Akiya risks jeopardizing his voyage-in and the high expectations readers have on it if he allows narratives such as *Gingong* to fall prey to nostalgia. It is safe to say that Akiya's narratives are based on real people and histories. At the same time, cultural encounters of

the past between indigenes/natives and white/colonizer, and the special relationship that Bah Bait has with his master is now a historical circumstance that should serve as a lesson for all of us today. Understandably, there is a strong pessimism in the way in which Bah Bait conceptualises the young people who are intoxicated with Western music. However, in my opinion, Akiya's youngsters should not be wasted and as an author, his right and ability to intervene is wanting. Surely, we do not wish to see children learning about his or her own culture from Western anthropologists, at least not at their tender age.

#### AN AFTERTHOUGHT ON ORANG ASLI-NESS

It is probably useful here to remind ourselves that *Tuntut* narratives written by Akiya about diverse Orang Asli characters and voices are pioneering works as far as indigenous literature is concerned. The absence of literary voices has to a certain extent made a fair representation of Orang Asli-ness impossible. This is why the publication of *Tuntut* is critical because it is a written literature (not a palimpsest) and will inevitably make the critical voyage-in that will endow Akiya with due recognition and a strong sense of literary agency to pursue his potential and mission against 'amnesia' and 'erasure'. The effects of these three inspiring and vibrant narratives on any mainstream reader may not be dramatic when compared to the constructions, which are disparaging and oppressive at times, entrenched in the centre.

Before *Tuntut*, Orang Asli did not attempt to write and write about themselves, and so the foundational figure of the indigenes was easily forgotten. The articulation of Orang Asli identities, according to Wan Zawawi Ibrahim (2001), is inevitably linked with the notion of power. With Foucaultian overtone, he points out that power is exercised in such a way that understanding of Orang Asli-ness is configured by interpretations or perspectives that suit the powers that be.<sup>3</sup> Undeniably, before the nascent of *Tuntut*, Orang Asli-ness only related to poverty, primitiveness and peripheral existence. For most of us, there exists a latent wish for them to remain 'primitive', so that we do not have to think about them. It is a daunting thought for some that Orang Asli are no longer 'simple jungle people', but are receptive of forces of modernity. Indeed, because their identities have evolved, as is demonstrated by the protagonists of the narratives, they have become as vocally complex as the Other.

#### CONCLUSION

Indeed, what does a 'voice' do if not construct or signify an identity? The ensemble of selected narratives has been substantial in redefining and problematizing Orang Asli identities. In actual fact, if they are not placed inside

a wider frame of reference such as the construction of Orang Asli-ness, as briefly discussed in the early part of this article, these narratives would quickly lose their potency. They will pass merely as stories of no significance, about marital customs, bamboo acoustics and poverty-ridden minorities.

Akiya needs to position himself more critically as the inner voice of his community so as not to ruin the harmony of the voices *en-voyage* to the dominant Other. Akiya unmistakably displays some naïveté, if not ambivalence, in his narratives – Wah Tipah’s characterisation as a ineffectual female intellectual in *Tuntut*, Jantan’s latent, but increasingly ‘landlord’-ish disposition in *Tanah* and Bah Bait ‘falling’ for the charming colonial muse in *Gingong* – which will mar his honourable intention to articulate authentic identities, initiate paradigm shifts, and later engage *both* centres – *Orang Asli* and the dominant Other – in an intellectual and critical dialogue that will lead to the understanding and recognition of each other’s identities.

The perceptive reader of *Tuntut* will be made to rethink Orang Asli discourse through the recognition of ‘postmodernist’ voices in the narratives. As a final analysis, one could say that through literature and writing, Akiya has admirably moved Orang Asli voices out of the silent shadow of vilification.

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