

THE MALAYS AND THE "SAKAI": SOME COMMENTS ON THEIR SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE MALAY PENINSULA¹

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[The term "sakai" has often been taken as a synonym of slave. In fact, a study of Malay texts and of the historical context indicates that, during the pre-colonial period, this term had very different connotations, referring to relations of personal dependence similar to those suggested by the words "subject", "dependent" or even "ally". Only after the British colonial intervention did the term "sakai" come to refer to the aborigines of the Malay Peninsula, with the added connotations of "savage" and "slave". If this interpretation is correct the question of interethnic relations in the pre-colonial Malay Peninsula needs to be reformulated.]

Istilah "sakai" selalu saja digunakan sebagai sinonim kepada hamba. Malah satu kajian penulisan Melayu dalam konteks sejarah menunjukkan bahawa di dalam zaman pra penjajahan, istilah ini mempunyai erti yang agak berbeza — ianya merujuk kepada perhubungan yang bercorak pergantungan perseorangan semacam dengan istilah "rakyat tanggungan" ataupun "sekutu". Hanya selepas penjajahan British baru konsep "sakai" dirujuk kepada orang-orang asli di Semenanjung Tanah Melayu dengan erti tambahan yang membawa maksud hamba dan ganas (primitif). Jika interpretasi ini betul, persoalan perhubungan antara kumpulan etnik di dalam zaman pra-penjajahan di Semenanjung Tanah Melayu perlu dikajisemula.]

1 INTRODUCTION

The question of the relations between the Malays and the aborigines in the Malay Peninsula is a sensitive one. In my opinion the emphasis which has been placed on the tension between these two groups hides the complexities of the historical process which has generated these tensions. This essay is an attempt at documenting that process: taking the word *sakai*, and the connotations it evokes, as a starting point, it hopes to unravel the social relations between the Malays and the aborigines in a historical perspective.

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1. Preliminary Definitions: Orang Asli and "Sakai"

The Malay expression Orang Asli means "original people" and is now widely accepted as the appropriate term for the non-Muslim peoples living in the interior of the Malay Peninsula. Coming under this designation are groups of hunters and gatherers, shifting agriculturists and wet-rice cultivators, who speak austroasiatic or austronesian languages. At present the Orang Asli number approximately 55,000 persons.²

In the ethnographic and colonial literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the term *sakai* refers either to all or some of the Orang Asli groups (see for instance Skeat and Blagden 1900). Malay dictionaries of the same period, however, indicate that the term *sakai* does not refer to an ethnic group but rather to a social group, the "dependents" or "subjects" (Farve 1880:595; Wilkinson 1959:1002). It seems important to investigate the mechanisms which allow for such a semantic shift.

First we should note that the Orang Asli do not use the term *sakai* to identify themselves. Wilkinson (1971:16) remarks that "the true *sakai* will not own to it." They refer to themselves by terms meaning "human" or "person" in their respective languages (*senhoi*, for instance, means "homme" according to De Morgan 1876:21; *semua* or *semaa* is a Malayised version of a Lanoh-Negrito word meaning "human", "man", according to Benjamin 1980; and the Jah in Hut - a Senoi group - means "human being" Couillard 1980:5), or by terms referring to their place of residence³, such as, for example, expressions *orang Krau*, "person from the Krau valley", *orang bukit*, "person from the hills", *orang laut* "person from the sea".

²This includes: the Semang groups or Negritos who speak languages described by Benjamin (1976) as North Asian (from the Austroasiatic language family), who are hunters and gatherers who, in 1969, numbered roughly 1,820 members (according to the Carey 1976:11); the Senoi groups who speak Center and South Asian languages (from the Austroasiatic language family) and numbered approximately 30,370 people (*ibid*); and the Proto-Malays who speak Malay dialects (from the Austronesian language family) and numbered about 20,830 people (*ibid*). The Senoi and Proto-Malays have a mixed economy combining, according to the region concerned, shifting agriculture, swamp rice cultivation, hunting, fishing, gathering and collecting jungle products at times, especially for the men, contract labor for wages. This Orang Asli population represents approximately 5% of the total population of the Malay Peninsula which is 11,050,000 (with 40% Malays, 35% Chinese and 10.4% Indians).

³The Orang Asli are not in this respect different from the Malays who also refer to their place of residence to identify themselves, e.g. *orang Kedah*, "a person from Kedah", *orang seberang*, "a person from the other bank, or the other side".

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2. The Relations Between the Orang Asli and the Malays as they have been Described by British Administrators and Anthropologists.

As the above mentioned terms indicate, the Orang Asli, except for a few groups living along the coast⁴, live in the interior of the Peninsula, especially in the foothills. This geographical distribution has given rise to much speculation concerning the origin of these groups and their relation with the Malay population. One "theory" put forward at the turn of the century (see for instance Skeat and Blagden 1906:530) depicts the Malays as a "superior" group who after landing on the coast of the Peninsula took away the land of the indigenous people and forced them to seek refuge in the interior. Winstedt (1934:91) declares that "forest land became the property of the person who cleared it, only provided he was a Muhammadan. The aborigines, as infidels, were hunted down and enslaved and, as Mr. Birch wrote in 1874, not the slightest notice was taken of the murder of a Sakai." This "theory" is specially attractive since it corresponds, to a certain extent, to the situation observed by the Europeans in the nineteenth century: the aborigines were indeed bitterly complaining about the way the Malays were treating them, going sometimes as far as asking for British protection (Skeat and Blagden 1906:537). In this context "hunting for slaves" became almost equivalent to "hunting for *sakai*". This prompted Newbold to say in 1839 that "slavery is invariably their condition" (1971 II:106). McNair, an engineer by training, noted in 1878 that "Sakais, or Jacoons are literally hunted down, captured, sold and made slaves" (1972:193) and he added further "the sakai women seem to have been frequently hunted down like wild beasts, becoming with their children slaves through generation after generation." Le Tessier in 1892 (p. 101) writes that the *sakai* were "hunted by the Malays, who stole their children, they were forced to leave their dwellings and fly hither and thither..." De Morgan (1886:10) gives the aborigines' point of view and says: "*les Malais surtout leur apparaissent comme de vraies betes feroces enlèvent leurs femmes et leurs enfants*" (the Malays especially they see as truly ferocious beasts oppressing them, destroying their villages and their plantations and carrying off their wives and children). In all these sources the *sakai* are depicted as the victims of a systematic and cruel manhunt.

This theme is carried over into the twentieth century. Dentan, for example, wrote in 1968 that for the Malays the aborigines are not merely cultural inferiors but despicable pagans to boot, 'sakai' good

⁴The Bési or Mah Meri live on an Island in the Klang estuary; the Orang Laut and the orang selat live along the southern coast of the Peninsula.

for nothing but slaves" (1968:2). According to him the Malay raids on Semai (a Senoi group) villages did not cease completely before the beginning of the twentieth century. The Jah Hut themselves tell the times when the Malays kidnapped their wives and children (personal communication and field notes). Nowadays still the women never wander very far from the hamlet for fear of being attacked by the Malays.

This portrait of the relations between the Orang Asli and the Malays as depicted by observers at the turn of the century has recently been denounced by Dodge (1981) as being biased so as to justify British intervention in the area by transforming the colonial power into a protector of the oppressed. According to Dodge "the treatment that the aborigines received at the hands of the Malays formed part of the defense for imperial expansion" (1981:1). Dodge documents his claim by underlining the fact that Malays and aborigines "blended spatially and mixed ethnically by intermarriage and were tied to each other through an "economic symbiosis" which made them dependent on each other. In addition, he insists on the fact that the Malays fear the magical powers of the aborigines, especially the alleged power to kill at a distance and to transform themselves into tigers. This, in his opinion, seems to be a sufficient force to create so to speak a balance of power between these two groups.

Dodge's argument is sound in so far as it denounces the ideological manipulation of the colonial powers and underlines the preoccupation as well as the perspective of the European observers. However, he has not, in my opinion, achieved his other purpose of explaining the relationship between Malays and aborigines. This I believe, is because he neglects the socio-historical underpinning of this relation.

In the following pages I do not deny the fact that the Malays captured and enslaved the aborigines, nor do I minimise this fact. Rather I hope to clarify who the *sakai* are and what is the nature of the social relations which have governed their integration into Malay society.

3. The Frame of Reference and the Proposed Argument

We have seen that, in spite of the fact that the term *sakai* is used by the Orang Asli to refer to themselves, this term appeared in the European literature to designate the non-Muslim tribes of the Peninsula which were the object of raids to obtain slaves. In this context the word *sakai* is used as a vague ethnonym with negative

connotation. I will explain this socio-historical "savage" colonialism had very dependence "dependence" to settle the Orang Asli this relationship vocabulary help us to relation between

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Dictionary not for a probable etymology of its original word *Saka* "companion" term *sakha* (which can phraseology behavior to that the "companion" in a trading back as far as we suppose the word people direct

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connotations somewhat similar to the word "savage". In the following pages I will explore the connotations of the word *sakai* in different socio-historical contexts. I will try to show that this connotation of "savage" is valid for only one historical period, namely that of the colonial intervention. Before this period the word *sakai* seems to have had very different connotations reflecting relations of personal dependence similar to those suggested by the terms "subject" or "dependent", and indeed even "ally". These comments are not meant to settle once and for all the question of the relations between the Orang Asli and the Malays but rather to highlight some aspects of this relation which have too often been overlooked. A study of Malay vocabulary, of literary sources and of the history of the area should help us to clarify, at least to a certain degree, the evolution of the relation between these two groups.

II THE WORD *SAKAI*: ETYMOLOGY, SEMANTIC FIELD AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Dictionaries usually list the word *sakai* as a Malay word; if it were not for a comment by Skeat and Blagden (1906:22) concerning its probable etymology as suggested by Grunwedel, an interesting aspect of its original meaning would be lost. According to Grunwedel the word *Sakai* comes from the Sanskrit "*sakhi*" meaning "friend", "companion", "comrade"⁵. Benveniste (1969 I:337) notes that this term *sakha*, "companion", often appears with the terms *seva*, *siva* which can be translated by "propitious", "friendly", "dear") in the phraseology of the Vedic hymns implying a certain type of friendly behavior toward partners in an alliance. This etymology suggests that the word may originally have referred to the indigenous "companions" with whom Hinduised traders were dealing, "partners in a trading alliance" which, if we trust the archeological findings, goes back as far as the seventh century or earlier in the Malay Peninsula. If we suppose for a moment that such was the case we should note that the word refers to "companions", to "partners in an alliance", to people directly involved in a trading relation and not to the overall

⁵Sakhi: nominative singular *sakha*, plural *sakhayas*, accusative singular *sakhayam* (Stchoupak 1932:762) means "friend", "companion", "comrade" and should not be confused with the Sanskrit term *sahaya* also meaning "companion", "comrade", "ally", "assistant" (Stchoupak 1932:826) which has been borrowed in Malay to mean "slave" "humble servant" and "I". The word *saksi* is also written *sakey*, *sakay*, *sakei*, in different texts depending on the period. Burnouf (1866:707) translates the Sanskrit *sakeya* by "friendly".

indigenous population⁶. In this context it is not strictly speaking ethnonym.

Alternatively we can go back to Malay texts, such as the Hang Tuah⁷, and locate this word in a specific social context. An example is the installation of the first *raja* or monarch, called *raja* Sumatra by the people of Bentan⁸ who were anxious to have a king at the head of their settlement. The word *sakai* appears for the first time when we are told that the "wealthy", the *Orang kaya*, and the "big men" or *orang besar*, met to discuss of an eventual trip to Sumatra to offer their respects (*menjadi hamba*) to the *raja* of Siguntang and ask him to install one of his sons at the head of their negeri or settlement. Once the decision had been taken, the preparation for the trip began. They called (*mengerahkan*) on the *sakai* to get their boat ready for the trip. After the new *raja* arrived, all the important people in the community paid their respects, including the *orang kaya*, the *orang besar*, who controlled (*memegang*) the rivers, and the *penghulu* who controlled (*memegang*) the *sakai*. We are thus confronted with a series of words in need of further clarification.

First we have the settlements, or *negeri* (a Sanskrit term meaning "town", "city", "state", "settlement") headed by the *orang kaya*, the "big men", and the *orang besar* the "wealthy-powerful" (*kaya* meaning both "wealthy" and "powerful"). In the Hikayat it was they who deemed it important to establish a *raja* at the head of their colony. The *Raja* comes from Sanskrit (referring to the "prince", the "ruler") where it has a quasi religious connotation. The *raja*, or *raj* in Sanskrit, does not give orders but makes rules; he establishes what is "right" or "just" (Benveniste 1969 II:15). Thus, the *raja* of Siguntang who asked one of his sons to become the *raja* of Bentan, advises him to look after his people- the *rakyat* (a word from Arabic origin meaning "subject") without anger, in a just manner (Hang Tuah 1975:15). So we have specified the types of authority bearer. The *raja* holding a position with a quasi religious dimension and responsible for keeping his people in the right.

⁶There is a similar phenomenon in Timor where the word *belu* meaning "friend" in the dialect of the Austronesian languages spoken in Timor, has been borrowed by the Portuguese to refer to those who were the trading allies of the Europeans (Forman 1977:100).

⁷Hang Tuah, transcribed by Kassim Ahmad in 1964 is not dated. However, the last event mentioned in the text occurs in 1641 and in 1736 the epic is mentioned by Werndly suggesting that it was written, or at least revised, in the seventeenth century.

⁸Bentan, now known as Riau, was founded during thirteenth century as a colony of Palembang or Srivijaya; it is located South of the Malay Peninsula.

...king, and the *orang besar* and *orang kaya*, whose authority rests substantially on wealth.

As it appears, the inhabitants of the kingdom accept the authority of the *raja*, they make themselves his *hamba* or "servant". This word *hamba* is also used as a personal pronoun, first person singular, "I"; so the word *sahaya*, from Sanskrit, meaning in Malay "humble servant", and *patik* and *pacal* which indicate a total submission towards the rulers. These terms refer to an attitude, the acknowledgement of one's inferior position; they are often translated by the word "slave", but unless this use of the word "slave" is understood in a very humble fashion, it is rather confusing. Indeed these people are not "slaves" in the way we understand the term in the context of the Roman Empire or the South of the United States. Those who call themselves "humble servants" are often neither "humble" nor "servants"; they simply acknowledge their interlocutor's superior social position. The word *sakai* is never used in such a context. Nobody uses *sakai* to mean "I" or "your humble servant".

The *raja*, when he is at the head of the state⁹, is assisted by the *menteri*, the *temenggung* and numerous other people chosen among the higher ranks, and he is surrounded with "followers" who are his "dependents" and are protected and maintained by the court. Among these "dependents" we find the *biduanda* (a word derived from a Sanskrit term referring to royal musicians; in Malay it refers to the King's messengers, and, as if to confuse translators, it also refers to the original inhabitants of the Peninsula¹⁰). Nobody seems to agree as to whether the *biduanda* were chosen among the children of the higher ranking officials or among the children of the indigenous people. In *Ok afi Hang Tuah* (1975:P16) we read that forty *anak orang keluaran jadi biduanda*. Here the word *keluaran* is the key to the puzzle since it specifies the origin of the *biduanda*, but it is itself an ambiguous term. Ahmad (1975:530) who has transcribed the text glosses the *orang keluaran* as "the people" (*orang kebanyakan*) but the dictionary gives as a translation of *keluaran* the words "outer", "strange", "foreign" and "common" (from the root *luar* meaning the outer portion). Could the "people" consists mostly of "foreigners", people "outside" the ethnic group holding power? It is obviously

⁹The title *raja* applies to all those with "royal blood" along the patriline (Kahar Bador 1975:135).

¹⁰Hooker (1976:179) notes moreover, that the indigenous inhabitants of Negeri Sembilan were known by the name of Biduanda Waris, an expression he translates as "the royal, in the sense of ancient and original, guardians (of the land)".

very tempting to conclude that the term *biduanda* referred to "royal followers" chosen among the indigenous people of the country.

Among the followers in the court we also find the *budak raja* are the "children of the monarch"¹¹ a rather flowery expression to refer to his "protégés"; the *hamba raja* an expression generally translated as "king's slaves" but which refers to a state of personal dependence where "services" and "protection" are being exchanged; the *pegawai* (from the root *gawai*, a "tool", an "instrument") who are the government agents and finally the *dayang-dayang*, the young women who are also members of the court, serving the monarch or his followers.

Under the authority of the rulers, but not necessarily in their immediate circle, we find the *batin* and the *penghulu*. *Batin* refers to the "tribal chief" of the indigenous people. Up till today the Senoi and the Proto-Malays all have a *batin* at the head of their respective communities. We have seen above that the *batin* controls *memegang*, the root *pegang* to "hold", to "grasp", to "control" (the *batin* in the epic *Hang Tuah* 1975:16). In the same episode of the epic the *batin* controls the *raja* in the same way and on the same occasion as the *orang besar* and the *orang kaya* (the "big-men" and the "powerful men", the "wealthy"). The *batin* acknowledged the sovereignty of the *raja* and were thus "subjects" of the monarch; the people they represent were by extension part of the *rakyat* the "common people". It is important to note here that neither this text nor the text of the Malay Annals provide support for the conclusion accepted by Kassim Ahmad (1975:531), that the *batin* was the chief of the *sakai*. This does not mean that the *batin* did not have *sakai* under his control. For instance, the *batin* coming to rescue the hero of the epic *Hang Tuan* used seven boats and his *sakai*, whom he told to paddle more vigorously and on the way (1975:24). In the same epic it is the *penghulu* who was said to control the *sakai* (*memegang*) the *sakai*. This term *penghulu* comes from the root *hulu* meaning the "head", the "upper waters", the "interior of a country" and the prefix *peng* referring to the "person", thus "the one who is head of" and we may add "with regards to the interior of the country"¹². In the epic *Hang Tuah* the *penghulu*'s control is illustrated by the use of the verb *mengerahkan*, from the root *kerah* "corvée", which means "to call people to work".

¹¹*Budak* means "children" and has in Java the additional meaning of "slave"; it does not mean that this additional connotation attaches to the Malay term *budak* as used in Malaysia.

¹²*Penghulu* also means "village headman".

...call people together for forced labour, mutual defense"¹³. The *penghulu* calls upon his *sakai* for specific reasons: to provide transport for the *orang kaya* and the big men when they go to Sumatra (Hang Tuah 1975:14); to carry goods, to fight with their chiefs (see the Sejarah Melayu translated by Brown, where *sakai* is translated at times by "crew", pages 197 and 167, and by "tribesmen", page 198). The word *sakai* therefore, referred to people who were subject to corvee under the authority of a *penghulu*.

How did the *sakai* differ from the "common people", the *rakyat* who are also subjected to corvee? The word *rakyat* (which is also written *raayat*, *ra'yat* and *rayat*) comes from Arabic and refers to the "subjects", the "common people", the "rank and file in the army". It suggests a relation of personal dependence between subjects and monarch. As such it differs from more descriptive terms such as *orang kebanyakan* which can be translated by "the masses" (from *orang* "human beings", *kebanyakan* from the root *banyak* "much", "many", "quantity"); *orang ramai* (*ramai* means "crowded" "populous") which may be translated as "the populace"; *orang kampung* or "villagers" (*kampung* means "assembling", "grouping", "cluster of houses"); and finally *isi negeri*, "population" (*isi*, "contents", "flesh"; *negeri*, "town", "city", "state", "settlement"). The word *rakyat* from Arabic, overlaps with the Malay expression *anak buah* (*anak* means "child" and *buah* means "fruit") which can be translated either by "descendants" or "the people under the charge of a headman or chief". The latter example suggests a kinship tie between a chief and his dependents, and this is consistent with the social organisation of the Malay village community, based on kinship with a headman chosen among the elders. This headman is called *ketua* (from the root *tua*, "old", "matured", "age", "senior") or *penghulu* depending on the area and on the period. By extension the people who have as their head a *batin* are considered his *anak buah*; among the Orang Asli today the *batin* still refers to his followers as his *anak buah*. The word *rakyat* refers to all the subjects of a monarch whatever their origin or ethnic background. Yet there is some confusion as to the proper translation of this term when it is found in older texts. Wilkinson (1959:955) mentions that the expression *orang rakyat*, which could be translated "the people", refers more specifically to the Proto-Malay subjects of a Malay chief or Sultan in opposition to his more "civilised" Malays.

¹³We should also note the expression *juru kerah*, from *juru* which carries the idea of "specialist" and *kerah*, "corvee". Meaning "the one in charge of corvee". It is used to designate one of the assistants of the *batin*, and this, in my opinion, supports the hypothesis according to which those under the authority of the *batin* were also in a relation of dependence vis-a-vis the monarch and that, just like the Malay peasants, they were liable to corvee.

He adds that the *orang rakyat* are considered higher than the *sakai* the social hierarchy, except in Riau where all the Proto-Malays called either *sakai* or *rayat*, the *sakai* being above the others¹⁴. In the famous story of Abdullah, written at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Hill 1970:256), the word *raayat* is used by the author to the aborigines who acknowledge the Sultan of Malacca as monarch. The translators of *The Voyages of Mohamed Ibrahim Munshi* also mention that the term *rakyat* or *ra'yat* refers to aborigine subjects of a Malay chief (Sweeney and Phillips 1975). The solution to this translation puzzle can only come from a study of the history of the Malay Peninsula. I will come back to point later. For the time being it should be sufficient to mention in all probability the majority of the subjects of the Malay chiefs Sultans were "indigenous people", probably the ancestors of today's Orang Asli, and that it is only with the migration of more depressed Malay populations — in opposition to the "wealthy" trading migrants — that a class of subjects including both indigenous people Malays has been created.

How did the double roles of *batin* and *penghulu* come about? *batin*, as we have seen, is the tribal chief of the indigenous people he is the mediator between the latter and the monarch. The *penghulu* who is nowadays a village headman in the Malay setting, may have had other functions in the past. Two sources can help us clarify functions. Skeat and Blagden (1906 I:231-239) summarise description given by Logan in the nineteenth century of commercial relation between the Orang Asli and the Malays: "Malayan Penghulu, Jinang, or other headman in each river-district, also the head of the monopoly of trade with the Jakun". *Penghulu* were also fixing the prices with the *batin*, the chief or representative of the Orang Asli. The *penghulu's* functions might be best defined in terms of his role in the trade of jungle products.

On the other hand, Hooker (1976:179) who describes the political organisation in the Jelai area before the arrival of Minangkabau migrants¹⁵, claims that the *penghulu* was the territorial chief whose authority were the local chiefs in charge of the "indigenous people". This *penghulu* received his title from the *batin*, the tribal chief. The *penghulu*, according to this source, was in charge of the Orang Asli who had converted to Islam and who had obtained permission to leave their tribal chief to settle under the authority of the

¹⁴The author does not tell us why nor how he arrives at this conclusion.

¹⁵Minangkabau migrants moved into this region during the sixteenth century (Cant 1976).

the *penghulu* appointed by the *batin*. This text provides us with the second element relevant to our study, namely the introduction of Islam in the Malay Peninsula and its effects on the society. As the passage suggests a certain number of indigenous people converted to Islam and therefore found themselves in a separate category, keeping their inherited rights to land, but, for various reasons, wishing to settle outside the tribe¹⁶. Could it be then that in this distant past the word *sakai* meant "dependents" and "subjects" and referred to these groups of indigenous people converted to Islam, placed under the authority of a *penghulu* and thus subject to the latter's demands for corvee labour? This interpretation rests on tenuous information but it does allow us to resolve some of the puzzles mentioned above. Furthermore the privileged status of the *penghulu* would have allowed him to consolidate his position as an intermediary in the trade of jungle products. The passage quoted above suggests that the *penghulu* is a Malay; however, nothing would prevent an Orang Asli, especially if he had converted, from fulfilling this function. Unfortunately no source will ever allow us to verify this hypothesis since both foreign observers and the Malay writers consider an Orang Asli converted to Islam to be Malay¹⁷.

Up till now I have advanced the proposition that the word *sakai* refers to a group of people who are in a relation of personal dependence vis-à-vis a chief and who are subjected to corvee labour. In addition I have tried to show that it is difficult to establish whether this group of people is made up of all indigenous people in the Malay Peninsula, of only those involved in a relation of personal dependence towards a Malay chief¹⁸, of those who converted to Islam and formed a separate group, or simply of those who maintained commercial relations with Malay chiefs based on the trade of jungle products. In my opinion the choice depends on the socio-historical context we are considering. I will discuss this in the next section. Before tackling the socio-historical dimension one more point has to be clarified, namely the relation between the word *sakai* and the notion of slavery in the Peninsula.

¹⁶For religious reasons: the aborigines eat pork forbidden by Islam; and maybe for economic reasons in that as Muslims they were more easily absorbed into the trading community.

¹⁷It should be sufficient to recall here that the expression to refer to conversion to Islam is *masuk Melayu*, from *masuk* "to enter", and *Melayu*, "Malay", which can be translated as "to enter the Malay community", or "to become Malay". This expression is obviously more appropriate when an Orang Asli converts to Islam since no racial barrier can distinguish him from the Malays; on the other hand Chinese Muslim seem to remain first of all Chinese, this in the current context where the economic and political setting reinforce this distinction.

¹⁸A division between the sea or coastal and the inland Orang Asli may have occurred, leaving the latter, those settled in the valleys, more autonomous while the former, living along the coast, would have been under Malay chiefs.

In the Malay Peninsula, as in the other trading kingdoms of the Archipelago, personal dependence appears to be an important form of social relation with slavery-being the ultimate in a wide range of variations on this theme. These social relations of personal dependence do not concern only the Malay population, in fact, to the extent that the Orang Asli were considered the subjects of the Malay monarch, they were as likely as the Malays to fall into one or the other of the categories. Generally speaking we can distinguish four types of personal dependence verging on enslavement: 1) voluntary enslavement, that of the immediate dependents of a monarch or a chief, the *budak raja*, the *hamba raja*, the *orang hulur* (the latter are criminals who request royal protection, from *hulur*, 'letting go'), "slacking off", that of people reduced to utter poverty and asking for protection, and that of a number of adventurous young men, such as the hero of the epic *Hang Tuah*¹⁹.

2) Debt-enslavement, due to voluntary loan or to imposed fines. The debt-slaves are called *orang berhutang* (from *hutang*, "debt") and *hamba berhutang*.

3) Involuntary enslavement a consequence of raids or wars where people are captured and enslaved, or the buying of slaves on the slave market. The word used to refer to people in this category is *abdi* from the Arabic *abd*.

4) Enslavement which results from the dominant ideology granting the monarch and the ruling class the right of "looting" their subjects' wives and making it compulsory for all free men to provide corvee according to the wishes of the ruling class. The women, whether they are young or already married, are "kidnapped" to satisfy the wishes of the ruling class and taken to the court or to the chief's houses where they become prostitutes, concubines, servants, sometimes wives of the "followers". These are the court *dayang*, mentioned above. Forced labour or corvee mobilised the population for public works, for the upkeep of the compounds of the ruling class, and more importantly for wars. We have seen above that the word *rakyat* means "subject" and also "rank and file in the army".

The categories 1), 2) and 3), plus the *dayang-dayang* made up the "followers", the source of prestige and power for any important man.

¹⁹This list is not exhaustive but rather illustrative. For more details on the different terms referring to the "followers" and the "slaves" see Massard's paper on Slavery in the nineteenth century Malay Sultanates (*L'esclavage dans les sultanats malais au XIXe siècle*).

colonial Malay society²⁰. These followers defended the property of their "masters" and ensured the subsistence of the latter, as well as of his dependents. In return, they were maintained and "protected" by him. The followers were not subject to corvée and they gained prestige from the very fact that they were close to a great man. The rich are said to have had hundreds of followers. Reid (1980:249) mentions that the most powerful Javanese in Malacca reportedly had between six and eight thousand "dependents".

It is the categories 2) and 3) which come closest to the condition of slavery. The *abdi* were bought like commodities; they were often foreigners, and were by definition non-Muslim²¹. Maxwell (1890:254) mentions the Batak from Sumatra, the Abshis (abyssinians) and the Sakai. Bali, Nias and the Philippines were reservoirs of slaves²². On the other hand, these *abdi* often had the right to keep for themselves a share of their revenue, and some of them reached an important position in the society, sometimes themselves having slaves at their service. The fate of the debt-bondsmen or debt-slaves as well as that of those who are pledged in for debts, could be as miserable as that of the slaves, i.e. slaves as we understand it when talking about Rome for instance. All the labour of a debt-slave benefits the creditor and did not contribute to reduce their debt. In spite of the fact that they retained their status of free men their condition was such that they were entirely subjected to the will of their creditor.

Maxwell, a colonial administrator, prepared a report on slavery in the Peninsula in 1880 where he summarises what he calls the laws concerning slavery among the Malays. Two points should be made concerning this description: firstly, in spite of the fact that Maxwell satisfactorily distinguishes the status of free and that of unfree men, he includes under the term slave all types of personal dependence existing at the time, not differentiating the social relations characteristic of the society in question. Thus, he translates the expression *hamba raja* as the "royal slaves" (1890:254) and he adds that the latter are subject to very peculiar customs. This can easily be explained if we translate this expression as "the king's proteges" as we said above. Secondly, in his commentary, Maxwell (1890:254) includes the *sakai* in the list of people reduced to slavery and called *abdi*. There are two possible explanations for this: either he intends the term to mean the *orang asli* and knows

²⁰Refer to Gullick 1965:97

²¹Islam forbids the enslavement of Muslims.

²²Warren (1977:169) mentions that up till 1848 most of the captives (may be up to 65%) who were circulating in the slave trade centered on Sulu were from the Philippines, especially from Luzon and Visayas.

from good sources that the *orang asli* have been captured and reduced to slavery, or else he simply reports the common perception of the time and concludes *inter alia* from recurring uses of the term *sakai* in Malay laws that the Orang Asli were slaves. As we will see later, the Orang Asli were probably victims of the nineteenth century slave hunting, but is it really to these Orang Asli that the law texts are referring?

In the extracts from the Perak code of law²³ the term *sakai* appears beside the terms for debt-slaves, *biduanda* and *hamba* (1890:274). In both cases it is a law "protecting", so to speak, these "dependents". The first case dealing with the "dependents" of the *penghulu* or chiefs and the second case with those of the raja. In both cases the law forbids anyone to take or carry away these dependents without the permission of their chiefs; disobedience was met with a fine, the amount depending on the status of those involved. Such a law can be interpreted as a protection of the rights of the masters over their "property", namely their dependents. But it can also be looked at as a "protection" of these dependents against various aggressors in the region of prey for the slave trade. From this perspective the *sakai* were "goods" belonging to Malay chiefs, but their "valued" dependents with needs of protection. Yet, if these are simply dependents why use a different term and specify that they are *sakai*? In what context do these *sakai* acquire a value for their *penghulu*? These questions lead us to a study of the socio-historical context in which the relations between the Orang Asli and the Malay realised themselves.

III THE TERM SAKAI AND RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ORANG ASLI AND THE MALAYS IN A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the following pages I intend to highlight the historical events significant for the evolution of the relations between the Orang Asli and the Malays. This implies a selection of historical facts according to certain criteria and not an exhaustive review of past events. The trends are relevant: one, the gradual intensification of long distance trade and, two, the progress of foreign traders in their struggle to gain control over exportable resources.

1. The Srivijaya Period (Seventh to Eleventh Century)

No doubt trade existed in the Archipelago before this period, but it is only from the Seventh century onward that we have positive

information (1967:34-36) through the Malay text of Malacca (1967:123-124) products and between C (1977:142) crews, and far away reg

Srivijaya. "commercial" the T'ang. S in the area interior of S jungle products. Eleventh century the region a increasing pa brought about intensification probably accounted for the Malay Peninsula in the region of

Wheatley during the Srivijaya from the Malay Peninsula and we can postulate namely the Malay Peninsula do indicate indication (either) assert that are remarked it seems to benefit by the Malay Peninsula account believe that they are profiting from it

²³Extracts from the Perak Code of Laws Relating the Slavery — The Original Text Transliteration and Translation, Maxwell 1890.

²⁴Stargardt (1977) distance trade during

²⁵He mentions "wax and tin" (quoted

information concerning the Malay peninsula²⁴. According to Wolters (1967:34-36) it was during the Fifth century that the trade route going through the Kra Isthmus was abandoned in favor of the Straits of Malacca and the Straits of Sunda. According to the same author (1967:123-124, 137, 150) it was during that period that jungle products and spices were included among the luxury goods carried between China and the Middle East. According to Whitmore (1977:142) the boats transporting products and traders had Malay crews, and this indicates that the latter were already in contact with far away regions.

Srivijaya emerged, according to Wolters (1967 ch.14), after the "commercial explosion" which followed the unification of China under the T'ang. Srivijaya based its power on the control of maritime trade in the area but is also made alliances with populations living in the interior of Sumatra to enlarge its army and insure a ready access to jungle products (Whitmore 1977:143). Between the Seventh and the Eleventh century Srivijaya remained the main commercial power in the region and benefited from the intensification of exchanges the increasing participation of Arab merchants in the international trade brought about (Wheatley 1961:216-232; Sourdel 1976:322). This intensification of trade and the increasing demand for jungle products probably accounts for Srivijaya's establishing colonies on the coast of the Malay Peninsula in the north in the Kedah area, and in the south, in the region of Riau.

Wheatley (1959) concludes from his study of maritime trade during the Sung Dynasty (from 960 to 1126) that certain products from the Malaysian jungle were already exported during this period²⁵, and we can postulate that they were exported from specific points, namely the above mentioned colonies. These colonies from the Peninsula do not seem to be the result of conquest and there is no indication (either archeological or literary) which would allow us to assert that armed force was ever used. As Kennedy (1977:23-28) has remarked it seems more likely that the peaceful search for mutual benefit by the traders from Srivijaya and the indigenous people of the Peninsular accounts for the rise of these colonies. There is reason to believe that the jungle produce collectors were the indigenous people profiting from their knowledge of the social and ecological environment

²⁴Stargardt (1979) deals with the protohistorical period and the successive phases of long distance trade during the historical period, but archeological data remain scarce.

²⁵He mentions "ebony, gharu wood, laka wood, pandan matting, ivory, rhino horns, bee's wax and tin" (quoted in Dunn 1975:111).

(Dunn 1975:108). Moreover it is possible that by that time an inter-urban center already existed (as suggested by Kennedy 1977:31) since the production remained in the town was estimated at a hundred hundred jun (Reid 1980:238). These centers, generally located on the estuaries, must have been the first contact between the indigenous people of the Peninsula and foreign traders who were most probably Malays (from Sumatra) and perhaps Hinduised. It is in this context that the term *sakai* could have been used for the first time to designate the "friends", the "partners in alliance" based on trade, as its etymology suggests²⁶.

2. Java and the Fragmentation of Maritime Networks

During the Tenth and Eleventh century it was the Indian and Chinese traders who in increasing numbers took to the seas, hoping to obtain "exotic" resources, more specifically spices. This was to bring about the end of Srivijaya's monopoly. Gradually the north and west of Sumatra and Java established a direct contact with the foreign world. It is between the Tenth and the Eleventh century that fragmentation of trade routes occurred. During the period the Javanese imperialized themselves as intermediaries on the coast of the Philippines, in the north of Borneo, and in the north and west of Sumatra where they negotiated with the Chinese and the Chola who had settled there (Whitmore 1977:145). Until the Fourteenth century, Java maintained its hegemony over the ports of the neighboring islands, and thus controlled the spice trade. To maintain this control over the islands and the spices, the far away ports had to be neglected and this meant that some of these centers could acquire a certain autonomy.

It is in this context that Malacca was founded, first as a tributary of Ming China and then, after 1430, as a center in the international network (Wolters 1970:154-170). During the Fifteenth century Malacca became the main international port in the region and an important emporium for the archipelago's commercial goods. It stimulated trade in jungle products coming from the interior of the Peninsula and attracted numerous foreign traders as well as immigrants from neighboring countries. From an aboriginal fishing village it became a major urban center. Reid (1980:238) mentions that in 1510 there were 100 houses and a population estimated at 100,000 by Albuquerque.

²⁶In Fisher's list of minority groups living in the interior of Sumatra (1966:240-241) we find the term *sakai*; could they also have been Srivijaya's trading partners?

urban center was, however, only a facade on the sea; the interior remained sparsely populated and little developed (Dunn 1975:107). The town was entirely approvisioned from the outside and at least one hundred junks brought approximately 6,000 tons of rice every year (Reid 1980:237; Lombard 1970:852).

How did the development of Malacca affect the relations between the Orang Asli and the Malays? Malacca was founded on the site of an aborigine village and it is probable that these villagers as well as the neighbouring indigenous people were slowly absorbed in the growing society of the time. The indigenous people probably made up the majority of the subjects for a ruling class organised along the lines of a Hindu monarchy. I mentioned above a case where the *batin*, the chief of the indigenous people, acknowledged the authority of the monarch; I mentioned that the term *biduanda* referring to "royal messengers" also refers to the Orang Asli. Finally, I have noted that in many texts there is an ambiguity as to the meaning of *rakyat*, at times translated as "subjects", or "the rank and files of the army" while elsewhere it is synonymous with *sakai*. All of this leads us to believe that at one time the "people" who were mobilised for defense purposes included the Orang Asli and that *sakai* and *rakyat* covered at least partly the same social group.

The relation between the Orang Asli and the Malays would have had in this context two dimensions: on the one hand, as subjects the Orang Asli were bound to and even "enslaved" by the ruling class; on the other hand, as collectors of jungle products they must have enjoyed a certain protection. As I said above, the monarch and the aristocrats surrounded themselves with followers and slaves, the number indicating their power and their wealth. Thousands of men and women found themselves voluntarily or not subjected to the will of these despots. Whether it be debt-slavery, reducing those who were pawned to the state of slavery, or the enforcement of the ruling class' rights on the wives of their subjects, the result was the same. The "followers" whether they were the *hamba raja*, the *budak raja*, or mercenaries, put themselves voluntarily in the service of the ruling class in return for protection, maintainance and free access to enslaved women (Gullick 1965:98, 102-103) These women came from the villages and were taken away at the behest of the ruling class. Orang Asli and Malays, in so far as they were subjects, were equally victims of these extortions. Both were equally vulnerable to indebtedness and thus to enslavement; all were subject to corvee. Slavery as such became very important especially for the tasks associated with the ports: to tranship and transport goods and to store them, and also for numerous other tasks associated with trade. The slaves engaged in this work had

been captured or simply bought in Bali, Nias or other Islands of the Archipelago. We have no indication that the Orang Asli were, during that period, captured as slaves. It would seem on the contrary that such "hunt" would have been against the interests of the Malays and the traders. Here is why.

We have seen that the interior of the Peninsula was covered with forest and sparsely populated (Dunn 1975:107). It is the inhabitants of this interior who, in all probability, were the collectors of the products which were more and more in demand in the ports. The intermediaries were thus dependent on these populations to ensure a constant flow of products from which they were drawing their wealth. The low population density, the dispersion of the population and its notorious mobility²⁷ all contributed to make political coercion expensive and hardly feasible. The immediate answer to oppression being flight, the chiefs and the middlemen who wished to insure for themselves a constant supply of jungle products would have had to guarantee the protection of the collectors with whom they dealt. This protection was directed toward two potential aggressors: the creditors, anxious to enlarge the number of their dependents by issuing loans well known that the debtors would be hard pressed to reimburse, and the hunters, always greedy for human prey. The customary laws collected by Maxwell (1890) and discussed in section II, draw their full meaning in this context. As long as the population from the interior of the Peninsula remained scanty and mobile while constituting the only qualified labour power to collect jungle produce, it is probable that the oppression of Orang Asli by Malays could not go beyond certain limits. Even though the collectors were probably economically exploited they could not be totally enslaved. Moreover, it is likely that such important economic relations would have been consolidated by the parties through marriage and other types of alliances. We should not forget that Islam had just been adopted by the urban ruling trading class²⁸ and it is most likely that it had not yet penetrated the country side. The differences between the Malays and the Orang Asli were probably minor, differences in languages and customs, but surely not differences which would allow us to speak of "savages" and "civilised". Finally, there is some reason to believe that some of the Orang Asli themselves became middlemen and enriched themselves through this trade.

²⁷See Gullick 1965:29, Reid 1980:244 and Hang Tuah 1975:42 on the mobility of populations on the Peninsula and flight as a strategy when threatened with oppression.

²⁸The Malacca monarch converted to Islam in the fifteenth century.

3. The E

After the fall of the Majapahit Empire, the need to bring the producers under the control of Java led to the prosperity of the peninsula. In 1511 the Portuguese managed to take control of the Islands. Because of the intervention of the commercial groups, the Portuguese soon planned a pepper plantation in Lombar. In 1511, the Portuguese established relations with China; in 1512, they established relations with the Netherlands (1977:147). The population di

This political situation led to the fall of the Majapahit Empire towards the end of the fifteenth century. The penetration of the Portuguese into the Archipelago was where Minangkabau, the rivers and settlements with the Orang Asli. They themselves were legitimising their position. During this period, the population multiplied. Mines were discovered. This led to the nineteenth century when the Malays (from the nineteenth century) (1967:251). The population multiplied. The products. The population multiplied. The population multiplied.

²⁹During the seventeenth century, the Dutch controlled the spice trade, the Dutch controlled the spice trade.

3. The European Intervention (Sixteenth to Nineteenth Century)

After the Chinese and the Cholas, it was the Europeans who tried to bring themselves closer to both the "exotic" resources and the producers of spices. The Islands and thus the networks under the control of Java were the first to suffer from this new interference, but the prosperous port of Malacca did not escape European greed. In 1511 the Portuguese took over Malacca. A century later the Dutch managed to impose themselves in the commercial networks of the Islands. Because it weakened Javanese hegemony, the European intervention made it possible for various local groups to rise as new commercial powers and to claim a share of the trade wealth. These new groups soon got into competition with each other (Aceh developed pepper plantations and gold mines in the interior of Sumatra — Lombar 1967:66, Reid 1975:49 — Brunei and Sulu opened up trade with China; Mataram emerged from the interior of Java — Whitmore 1977:147). This competition developed into open conflicts, wars and population displacement.

This political turmoil deeply affected the Malay Peninsula. After the fall of Malacca, the Malay commercial center was displaced towards the south, in Johor, opening up a new region to foreign penetration. The conflicts arising in the different parts of the Archipelago²⁹ resulted in important migrations towards the Peninsula where Minangkabau, Bugis, Javanese and other pioneers moved up rivers and settled in the valleys. These settlers came into open conflict with the Orang Asli for access to land. Some of them imposed themselves violently, others opted for alliances, especially matrimonial, legitimising in the process their moving into Orang Asli territories. During this period the demand for tin increased and tin mines multiplied. Malay chiefs called upon immigrants to work in these mines. This development was so rapid that by the end of the nineteenth century, as early as 1885, there were about 500 tin mines registered in the district in Kinta alone, 350 of which belonged to Malays (from a report by the mine inspector quoted by Skeat 1967:251). The trade of jungle products also bloomed, but in the nineteenth century the Orang Asli were not alone in collecting these products. The settlers who opened up the forest increasingly participated in this trade side by side with the Orang Asli and in direct competition with them for access to the territory (Dunn 1975:118).

²⁹During the seventeenth century the expansion of Aceh, the destruction of the Bugis' Moluccan spice trade, the Dutch intervention in Minangkabau pepper production, to mention but a few instances.

During this period, but especially towards the end of the eighteenth century the relations between Orang Asli and Malays deteriorated. The *penghulu* of Malay chiefs tightened their control on the Orang Asli collectors with whom they had a long standing relationship; they could not, however, establish the same type of control over the new immigrants. The relation of dependence which previously worked in favor of the Orang Asli now operated against them; the *penghulu* — threatened by other middlemen, Malay and Chinese — turned up his collectors through credit and forbade access to his territory to other traders. He isolated the Orang Asli so as to keep his monopoly (Logan, quoted in Dunn 1975:116, said that it was strictly forbidden for foreigners to trade with Orang Asli.).

Malay immigration is often quoted as the main cause of the withdrawal of the Orang Asli towards the interior of the country; however, the chronic state of war seems a more probable reason. Conflicts between Malay chiefs for the control of districts rich in tin (well documented in Khoo 1975), and the wars over succession which were aggravated by foreign intervention, weighed on Malay and Orang Asli subjects and flight was often the only solution. Linehan (quoted in Cant 1973:25) describing the situation in Pahang in 1857 says:

Harried by both sides, impressed, forced to provide food for conflicting forces, deprived of what little property they possessed, subjected to great cruelties... Their villages overrun by foreign fighting men, their lot was unenviable. Many of those who could do so fled to adjoining states.

The Jah Hut, a Senoi group, settled in the region they inhabited today after having fled their ancient territory following the Rawa war in 1850 (personal notes and Linehan 1973:4).

It seems that during this period the Orang Asli were not the "valued" dependents they had been in the past. The immigrants provided an alternative labour force and the increasing oppression forced the Orang Asli to withdraw inland. Moreover, the intensification of trade also meant an increase in the number of slaves being traded (Warren 1977:162), and the Europeans were among the most important buyers. Abdullah Munshi (Hill 1970:183) described vividly the sale of slaves in the Singapore port after the arrival of a ship bringing about three hundred men, women and children. These slaves came from Nias, Bali, and the Philippines, and it is likely that the Orang Asli of the Peninsula were also captured and sold as slaves. Skeat and Blagden quote a certain Lister who wrote in 1860 that the Bugis and other pirates living along the coast of the Peninsula were raiding the interior of the country to capture non-Muslim indigenous people whom they then sold as slaves (this is further confirmed

Lombard 1973:19. The area of Negri Sembilan. Blagden, 1973:19. Asli did not

I believe the negative consequences for the Asli who fled to the interior of life, or to the interior in this context of the peninsula.

4. British

The British. The British century they came from East Asia but was the first country to develop a struggle for the territory therefore attracted immigrants who were welcomed by the settlers to settle the vast areas introduced and tracts of land for mining and, for coolies, almost women as compared to 1969:186). Some debt-slaves. They created a severe under these circumstances and caused remarks by the today's Orang Asli.

Finally, the reinforced isolation of the Orang Asli was isolated from the power of the

1) In 1881 for example

2) By capturing Orang Asli only seeking wealth

Lombard 1979). On the other hand it seems that in the Minangkabau area of Negeri Sembilan slave hunting was not so prevalent (Skeat and Blagden, 1906:544-545) and the relation between Malays and Orang Asli did not deteriorate during that period.

I believe it is during that period that the term *sakai* acquired a negative connotation. It probably referred then either to the Orang Asli who fled inland, refusing integration and reverting to a tribal way of life, or to those who became the victims of the hunt for slaves. *Sakai* in this context came to refer to the lowest social group in the Peninsula.

4. British Colonial Interference (End of Nineteenth Century)

The British only completed this process. During the eighteenth century they had focussed their efforts on China and Mainland Southeast Asia but towards the end of the nineteenth century they emerged as the first colonial power in the region. With them began a type of development which differed radically from that brought about by the struggle for the monopoly of resources. They introduced free trade and therefore attracted not only foreign traders by the thousands but also immigrants in constantly increasing numbers³⁰. The latter were welcomed by the colonial administration which wished to open and settle the vast unoccupied areas in the Peninsula. After 1900 they introduced *Hevea brasiliensis*, i.e. rubber, which soon occupied large tracts of land. In addition, they took over the development of tin mining and, here again, they encouraged the immigration of Chinese coolies, almost exclusively men. This created a permanent demand for women as concubines, prostitutes, servants and even wives (Loh 1969:186). Some of these women at least must have been slaves and debt-slaves. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 (Loh 1969:187) created a severe shortage of slaves and it is easy to imagine how, under these circumstances, the Orang Asli women should have been hunted and captured to satisfy this demand. This explains also the remarks by the nineteenth century observers and the stories told by today's Orang Asli of the capture of Orang Asli women³¹.

Finally, the political strategy of the British focussing on indirect rule reinforced the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims and thus isolated further the Orang Asli. The colonial administration took away the power of the district chiefs and limited the power of the

³⁰In 1881 for example, 89,000 Chinese arrived in Singapore (Emerson 1970:27)

³¹By capturing Orang Asli women to satisfy the demand of the male migrants, the Malays were not only seeking wealth, they were also protecting their own wives and daughters.

monarch to the administration of customary law and religious affairs. This brought about the formation of a religious bureaucracy³³, one of the few channels left to the monarch to exert power. This bureaucracy had as its aim the systematic application of Islamic precepts and as a consequence it accentuated the differences between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The introduction of land titles and the appropriation by the State of all non-cultivated land deprived the Orang Asli of free access to land and pushed them into the least fertile regions. The administration also attempted to put an end to shifting cultivation as practiced by Malay and Orang Asli alike. It also worked toward fixing the Malay peasants to their fields and introduced new techniques for wet rice cultivation. The Orang Asli persisted with shifting agriculture (or hunting and gathering depending on the groups), and were further isolated from the main currents of development.

These few points should be sufficient to illustrate how the Orang Asli found themselves isolated in an inferior social position and marginalised. It is in this context that they came within the purview of the nascent field of anthropology, that they were redefined as "savage" (the "wild men" of Skeat and Blagden) and protected as an endangered "species".

IV CONCLUSION

The term *sakai* has over the centuries had various meanings according to the socio-historical context in which it was used. The term is not an ethnonym. It has at different times referred to indigenous groups of the Malay Peninsula, the present day Orang Asli, "subjects" of a monarch or "dependents" of a chief, as a deprived social group, and as "savages" likely to be transformed into slaves.

For more than a thousand years the indigenous people were economically important as collectors of jungle products and as such played a role in the long distance trade between the Mediterranean and China. They were assimilated into the Malay trading community which

³²Since the Pangkor treaty of 1874 the Malay subjects are defined as those following Malay customs, speaking the Malay language and professing to be Muslims. It is this definition which has been used in the constitution of the country (Benjamin 1980:47 quoting a personal communication from Dr. Wang Gung Wu).

³³It was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that the religious bureaucracy consolidated throughout the country (Roff 1974:73).

was organised according to the model of a Hindu monarchy both at the level of social relations — some of the groups were absorbed in the society as “subjects” of the monarch — and at the cultural level³⁴. Originally this assimilation could have been justified both by their expertise as collectors of jungle produce and by their ancestral right to the land. As we have seen there is no indication of conquest and the ancient texts acknowledge the rights of tribal chiefs (the *batin*) on rivers and valleys. Such an integration into Malay society implies of course a certain degree of enslavement both for Malay and Orang Asli subjects. However, this enslavement should not be confused with true slavery. It is only a consequence of the dominant social relations and the ideology behind them which subjects the people to the will of the ruling class.

Throughout the history of the region, Chola, Chinese, Arab and when European traders have tried to get themselves closer to the producers to maximise their profit by reducing the number of intermediaries and deal directly with the local “big men”. They have in the process undermined the indigenous trade monopoly. Moreover the slow intensification of trade gave rise to tensions, first among the different trading centers in competition for access to the international networks, then within the ruling class of these different centers for the control both of the regions endowed with “exotic” products and of the collectors considerable population displacement. Such turmoil, though it shook the indigenous society, did not modify the dominant social relations within it.

British colonial intervention, on the other hand, set itself the goal of modifying these social relations. The development of primary industries and of new sectors such as the production of rubber was not left to indigenous initiative. This new type of development required large numbers of workers free of ties of personal dependence and deprived of their means of subsistence. Neither the Malays nor the Orang Asli could satisfy these conditions. Thousands of immigrants coming from India, from China and from the Archipelago were encouraged to come to the Malay Peninsula. The Malays very soon lost their privileged position both in the economic and political spheres; they were relegated to the country-side while the Orang Asli withdrew to forest enclaves. The expertise of the latter for the collection of jungle products was not relevant

³⁴Concerning this question refer to the excellent paper by Benjamin (1980) suggesting that the Proto-Malays from the south of the Peninsula do not correspond to a migration wave, as is often found in historical reconstructions, but rather that they represent groups of Austroasiatic speaking people who have been assimilated to Malay culture. This assimilation Benjamin calls “Malayisation of the Orang Asli”.

except maybe for a small number of middle men, Malays and Chinese, went on with a trade less and less significant for the national economy. Orang Asli represented in this new society the most dispossessed group and had to deal with discrimination and contempt, except perhaps from the part of the colonial administration which was quick to see in them an additional justification for its presence in the Peninsula. For those who advocated imperial expansion, to use Dodge's words (1981), the protection of the oppressed Orang Asli was part of the "white man's burden", a moral obligation requiring intervention that would bring some "order" among these "lesser breeds without the law" (quoted in Brown 1970:92). The Orang Asli who had been completely marginalised, often reduced to slavery by pirates and immigrants, were relabeled the "wild men" of the Malaysian forest, the *sakai* with negative connotations, requiring the protection of the new administration.

During the pre-colonial period the term *sakai* did not apply to any ethnic group. It referred to certain people who were involved in a social relationship similar to that between monarch and subject. We can conclude then that it is the social relations characteristic of the dominant group which define the relation this group entertains with other ethnic groups. During the colonial period the term *sakai* came to refer to the Orang Asli as an ethnic group. This new definition of the term was meaningful only vis-a-vis the interests of the British colonisers who then had become the dominant group. We can conclude then, that the relations between ethnic groups can be correctly understood only if we consider them both from the point of view of their relation to the dominant social relations and in an historical perspective. These few thoughts on the nature of the relation between the Malays and the Orang Asli organised around the term *sakai* illustrate this more general point.

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