



# **Tribal Communities in the Malay World**

**Historical, Cultural and Social Perspectives**

Edited by

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## INTRODUCTION

Cynthia Chou and Geoffrey Benjamin

This volume focuses on a distinct historical singularity – the Malay World – even though much of the material presented may seem familiar to researchers who have worked on other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> It should not come as a surprise to find, for instance, that certain peculiarities in the Malay World correspond to generalities uncovered by analyses of situations elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Such being the case, the aim of this volume is to offer theoretical, descriptive, and practical perspectives that will be relevant to researchers working on both the Malay World and beyond.

The scope of the volume is sufficiently narrow for historical, ecological, and cultural factors to be held relatively constant – notwithstanding the variations that do occur in the region – but it is also sufficiently wide for each of us to learn from the findings of the others. The collation of materials on Peninsular Malaysia with work from South Thailand, Indonesian Sumatra, Sarawak in eastern Malaysia, and from Singapore, has been a valuable exercise. This is especially so, as the contributions cover contemporary ethnography, sociology and political science on the one hand, and historical issues on the other.<sup>3</sup>

The tribal and recently-tribal people of the Malay World cover a broad spectrum. They include, as this volume shows, nomadic foragers (inland, coastal, and maritime), swidden farmers, traders in forest and marine products, petty commodity producers, emergent and established peasantries, proletarians, and professionals, among others.

Many broad themes can be found in this volume, some of which we highlight here. However, the issues discussed in all the contributions overlap in numerous ways. Therefore, rather than organizing the chapters according to the usual thematic groupings, which would direct the reader's attention unnecessarily to one or another frame of reference, we have instead arranged them along a north-south axis, commencing in South Thailand, moving southwards through Malaysia and Singapore, and finally reaching Indonesia. In so doing, we believe that the reader will gain a panoramic view of all the themes and issues that interlock in each of these areas.

## SOME GENERAL THEMES

### NEW THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This volume introduces to a wider readership some of the imaginative theoretical work that is currently going on in Southeast Asian studies. Different approaches to the study of tribal communities are demonstrated in the following pages, for example, a radically rethought "orientalist" approach to historical ethnology (Dentan), and the mythologizing (Hamilton, Porath), invisibilizing (Mariam) and postmodern (Roseman, Lye) approaches.

### ETHNOGENESIS

There is much evidence to show that insider-outsider imagery is a basic theme in human cultures generally. What is important in the Malay World, however, is that this theme has often had to be established within a relatively homogeneous population – especially where the tribal peoples in question are also indigenously Malay-speakers. The question of being an insider or outsider has thus become more pronounced in the Malay World than elsewhere and it has become an important feature in social discourse and local historical documents. Concern over the question of autochthony and indigeneity is a characteristic feature of the Malay World. In Malay-type polities, it seems necessary for self-declared "outsiders" to capture, subvert or replace a *recognized* indigeneity via subjugation-through-marriage and cultural suppletion (Ginting, Schefold, Alexander & Alexander). In Thailand, however, the rulers must be seen as both autochthonous and Thai (Hamilton, Porath). In neither case do the polities treat their minorities in accordance with the wishes of the minorities themselves. Thai and Malay polities both find it difficult to "place" their indigenous minorities (tribal or otherwise) conceptually in their scheme of social order – though their difficulties differ in character.