"Leaderless" resistance? An anatomy of female leadership in Orang Asli grassroots movements

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Abstract

This article unpacks community-level female leadership among Malaysia's indigenous Orang Asli community. The power dynamics of this community's relationship with state institutions have been uneven. Critics accuse the authorities of infantilizing the community, through gendered and patriarchal behaviour (for example, male government officers only interact with male heads of communities). Based on the fieldwork including seven interviews with female and male Orang Asli grassroots leaders of an independent, pro-indigenous movement – one which is apparently "leaderless" in terms of its organizational structure – we show how they challenge the abovementioned attitudes through neo-empowerment and agentic efforts, through collective narratives of the environment, camaraderie and compassion. These grassroots efforts also appeal to a new cohort of indigenous people, embody gentle negotiation strategies, and recognize gendered discourses of agency and control. We show how this leads to the creation of a more inclusive, progressive, and feminist-driven empowerment strategy, eventually building resistance to traditional patriarchal structures.

Keywords

Orang Asli, Malaysia, feminist politics, empowerment, traditional patriarchy, indigenous people.

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Introduction

The Orang Asli (OA, lit., 'the original people' in the Malay language), the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia, occupy an "ambivalent position [...] vis-à-vis the Malays", one which "illustrate[s] that these categories are not static, and that at times, their meanings shift" (R. Idrus 2014: 119). However, despite the ambivalence and shifting nature of their status and position, they are still commonly portrayed in stereotypical fashion by the local media as charity cases,[1] poor (C. Nicholas 1997: 19-24), anti-development (Z. Ibrahim 1996: 1-19; M. Jamal and B.N. Abaspour 2020: 55-57; J. Ong 2010), still in need of government aid[2] and generally misunderstood. Often, the stereotypes overlook how the OA are not a *single* people – indeed, this is a collective term used for 18 sub-ethnic groups with unique languages and cultures, which are generally classified under three main categories – the Negrito, Senoi, and Aboriginal-Malays/Proto-Malays.

Although such narratives are prevalent (and often problematic), it is important to note that a movement initiated by OA women has emerged, igniting a new agenda while also being inclusive of different voices within the indigenous community. We are also cognisant of the existence of similar yet distinct terms in the discourse (some of which are historically loaded) – that is, indigenous, aboriginal, OA, and Orang Asal; the first term includes the OA and the Bumiputera (lit., 'sons of the soil') communities of Sabah and Sarawak — as Sandra Khor Manickam (2015: 9) has pointed out. Thus, this paper analyses and examines how this brand of female leadership amongst the OA has begun to gather momentum through grassroots movements. Since the early 1990s, there have been several people-led movements advocating OA issues and their rights, for example, the Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Association (POASM), the Centre for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC), and the New Life One Heart Group (SPNS) (Nicholas 2000, 1997; Ong 2010). Specifically, the emergent Network of Orang Asli Villages of Peninsular Malaysia ("Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia" in Malay, or JKOASM), which has gained a reputation for its organic sense of camaraderie, is positioned as a powerful force for the protection of their customary land rights. Curiously for us, it is perceived to be "leaderless", but as we will argue below, this perception allows women to play leadership roles, even if there are no formal hierarchical arrangements in place.

JKOASM, founded in 2008 by a female OA leader, Tijah Yok Chopil, received a significant attention when it succeeded in uniting various communities, particularly in addressing the struggle to defend their customary land. It is worth explaining this system in more detail since land is a constant theme in OA struggles. Indigenous customary land rights or titles are derived from the authority of traditional customs and customary laws, and are commonly acknowledged and enforced by members of a community. They differ from documentary land titles, which are obtained from documents resulting in

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[1] Interview with Tijah Yok Chopil (48 years), Kampung Chang Lama, Bidor, 22-04-2018.
[2] Interview with Fatimah Bah Sin (42 years), Kuala Lumpur, 23-09-2018.

turn from the state's legislative authority (SAM and JKOASM 2016). There are now several JKOASM branches – specifically in the states of Kelantan, Perak, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor. Among its early successes was forming a coalition called "Gabungan NGO-NGO Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia", together with several other OA non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which gathered 2,500 OAs in the administrative capital of Putrajaya on 17 March 2010 to protest against and reaffirm their disagreement with the land title policy (their memorandum was signed by 12,000 OAs). Gabungan and POASM would then sign another memorandum. Collectively, both memoranda voiced grassroots-level protests against the Orang Asli Land Alienation and Development Policy, which granted up to six acres of land for palm oil cultivation to each OA head of household. In fact, it was considered a violation of their customary land rights because their customary lands were not mentioned: thus, they no longer had a legal existence. Besides affecting OA livelihoods, more than 70 per cent of their customary lands would be lost in this process. JKOASM's achievements are especially notable, given that female leadership among indigenous communities is not always celebrated (SAM and JKOASM 2016: 54-80).[3]

Uniquely, a more feminist- and female-led approach was used so that JKOASM could reach out to their respective communities to educate, empower, and embrace. This did not mean that they shied away from active protests, however. In each state where they had branches (except Selangor), JKOASM members and supporters created human blockades to prevent the encroachment of logging companies and the deforestation of their ancestral land (S.M. Abdullah 2018; R. Anand 2018). Thus, they expressed their dissatisfaction with logging activities and encroachment, which have affected the forests and their lives. In the previous years, OA villagers were not as informed about ways of safely protesting as they are now, and neither were they equipped with the same knowledge of basic rights as other non-OA Malaysian citizens that had permitted the latter to protest against discrimination or injustice.[4]

Our article will be divided into several parts. The first highlights JKOASM's importance as a "leaderless" and non-hierarchical movement meant to bring the community together in the face of older patriarchal practices. The second discusses a theoretical and conceptual framework of women's leadership (including maternal thinking, which is subsequently expressed in "maternal politics") and how empowerment and agency are achieved from a feminist perspective. The third unpacks the narratives of OA female leaders and their allies about gender-related struggles and strategies in fighting for equality and the right to defend their community, while also revealing the importance of customary lands and nature for the affirmation of their identity/identities, ways of life, livelihoods, indigenous knowledge, cultures, and traditions.

In sum, by taking the female leadership of the OA grassroots movements as our main focal point, we uncover how JKOASM's establishment has been

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[3] Interviews with Fatimah Bah Sin (42 years), Kuala Lumpur, 23-09-2018 and Tijah Yok Chopil (48 years), Kampung Chang Lama, Bidor, 22-04-2018.
[4] Interview with Fatimah Bah Sin (42 years), Kuala Lumpur, 23-09-2018.

able to: (1) bring about unity and cooperation among their geographically scattered communities; (2) protect their customary lands and rights; and (3) represent their social, political, and economic issues at the national level.

Understanding the Orang Asli

As mentioned above, the communities considered as OA include the Negritos (comprising the Lanoh, Kintak, Kensiu, Bateq, Jahai, and Menderiq), Senoi (comprising the Semai, Che Wong, Temiar, Mah Meri, and Semoq Beri), and Proto Malays (comprising the Kuala, Kanak, Seletar, Jakun, Temuan, and Semelai) (JAKOA 2015). The Semai, Temuan, Jakun, and Temiar are the largest groups. The latest data obtained from the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA 2021) show around 209,680 OAs, mostly living in Pahang, Perak, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, and Johor.

According to the Federal Constitution 160(2), the OAs are officially aborigines of the Malay Peninsula and thus among Malaysia's four Bumiputera groups, including the Malays as well as the natives of Sabah and Sarawak. This vague definition states only that an aborigine is a person: (1) whose parents are both aborigines or that one parent is, or was, a member of an aborigine group; (2) who speaks an aboriginal language; and (3) who habitually follows an aboriginal way of life, its customs, and beliefs. Meanwhile, the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 (also known as Act 134, amended in 1967 and 1974) was the beginning of the federal government's formal placing of the OA under the responsibility of the Jabatan Hal-ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA, now JAKOA) to protect them from exploitation and the influence of subversive ideologies (Judicial Appointments Commission; R. Bulan 2010).

Unlike Sabahan and Sarawakian *Bumiputera* with their more institutionalized legal status, the OAs are considered a marginalized group, governed by the provisions of federal law, the senate or members of parliament. Matters relating to lands and forests fall under both state jurisprudence, the National Land Council and the National Forestry Council (SAM and JKOASM 2016; A.M. Nah 2008; V. Somiah and J.R. Sto. Domingo 2021).

The OAs are very aware of their future, that they politically, economically, socially, and culturally lag behind other ethnicities and that their survival is dependent on the federal government or JAKOA (Idrus 2011: 54; C. Nicholas, J. Engi, and Y.P. Teh 2010: 3-10).[5] Even though the OAs are often reminded that Act 134 does have provisions for the gazetting of Aboriginal reserve land, the abovementioned violations and encroachments by plantation, mining, and logging interests have forced them to assert their rights as indigenous people.[6] Nobody else can defend their present and future except their own communities, given the failure of officialdom to reduce poverty and protect their rights (Nicholas, Engi, and Teh 2010).[7]

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[5] Interview with Tijah Yok Chopil (48 years), Kampung Chang Lama, Bidor, 22-04-2018.
[6] Interview with Tijah Yok Chopil (48 years), Kampung Chang Lama, Bidor, 22-04-2018.
[7] Interviews with Lela Telan (44 years) Kampung Sebir, Negeri Sembilan, 3-10-2019, and Mustafa Along (early 30s), Kaleeg Blockade and Kampung Kaloi, 31-08-2018.

OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Leadership is a multifaceted concept which is not easily generalizable because it encompasses different meanings and interpretations – hence, there is no clear-cut consensus on the terms used or their precise definitions. These multiple definitions, however, all imply the emergence of a leader who is usually situational, but who can also be temporary or permanent (J.B. Spotts 1976: 45-46). Leadership also involves demonstrating one's ability and capacity to lead, embrace diversity, and display the necessary vision and skill to unite their groups or communities, coupled with deep-rooted commitment, strong feelings, and a willingness to face difficulties and challenges. Generally, leaders who can successfully mobilize and coordinate group activities to achieve the main purpose(s) of their struggle can inspire like-minded friends or colleagues, who in turn regard them as motivating factors in shared struggles. Traditionally, leadership is identified with hierarchies (being solution-oriented) and the external attributes of leaders (for example, their direction and vision) rather than the internal ones.

These multiple meanings and associations relating to the concept of leadership have emerged from diverse areas, perspectives, and disciplines, which are based in turn on different organizational theories, movements, or political approaches. Leadership perspectives are mostly determined by structure, culture, and gender. It is the latter that we are specifically interested in here, particularly how gender differences suggest different leadership strategies and styles. Previous relevant studies show that women face disadvantages because of distrust and uncertainty about their leadership abilities when they become subject to the suspicion that women in leadership positions tend to become too dominant in trying to prove that they are better than or equal to men (F.L. Denmark 1993: 353-354).

Undeniably, most female grassroots leaders have challenged the "natural", predetermined gender roles, emphasizing how these are socially constructed. To overcome these and other related barriers, female leaders have relied on numerous strategies, using their interpersonal skills, personal motivations, and the trust of their communities to lead their movements. However, for L.K. Richter (1991: 525-526), most female leaders remain overshadowed by patriarchal culture and are associated with the subordination of women in society. Lacking a formal institutional base, they primarily rely on individual qualities (for example, interpersonal skills, charisma, work ethos, social responsibility, and personal motivation) rather than founding formal or registered organizations.

C. Elliot and V. Stead (2008: 166-167) discuss the emergence of female leaders and the effectiveness of their leadership, particularly when it includes specific feminine features. Among feminine leadership's notable features are leaders' personal upbringing, social environments, as well as networks and alliances. Respondents in this study who have embraced the ideology of feminine leadership, were generally raised within the practices of community

life, where the responsibility for educating, disciplining, and exposing the children in the village were achieved communally. Experiencing such an upbringing also plays a significant role in their personal path to leadership, their place within the family and the greater community, and how this will later influence house they raise and educate their children. The entire cycle is vital in shaping the personal aspirations to lead for the leaders in this study and their strong sense of inclusivity as a means of problem-solving, strategizing, and community engagement.

In studying the increasing number of female leaders, different styles such as effective leadership or transformational leadership have been the focus of research (C.L. Hoyt 2010; see also E.K. Kaufman and P.E. Grace 2011). The range of styles promotes inclusion at all levels, meaning that leaders become responsible for uniting their respective communities and holding members accountable for inclusive practices. For example, all members of the community are to be treated equally and given equal platforms to voice their opinions. Hoyt (2010: 485) explains that leaders play important roles in helping to establish positive norms, such as building organizational cohesiveness (that is, a strong sense of connectedness and a sense of belonging among group members). Combining features such as individual experience and interpersonal skills (for example, practising effective discussions and negotiations) at organizational and societal levels enables women to perform transformative leadership, with subsequent positive impacts for both the men and women working under them.

Power and empowerment

All forms of leadership are closely associated with power, which can be defined as having influence over other individuals, valuable resources, and more. Power operates in several forms in organizations or movements, and from a feminist perspective, it may involve: (1) an either/or relationship of domination and subordination based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation; (2) power to solve problems, or decision-making power in solving problems, in which leaders play creative and enabling roles; (3) organizational actions, in which common understandings are outlined to achieve collective goals; and (4) power within, or individual self-confidence, self-awareness, and assertiveness in becoming an agent of change (Z. Oxaal and S. Baden 1997: 1). N. Kabeer (2012: 216-218) is particularly interested in the importance of the fourth aspect (that is, the power within) and emphasises women's decision-making abilities, a consideration which will be important in the section below.

The concept of women's empowerment is highly significant in feminist research, which stresses "empowerment", specifically in the leadership literature. Empowerment is a process of enabling individuals to acquire the power to think and act freely, exercise choice and fulfil their potential as full and equal members of society (A. Dandona 2015: 40). In this context, leadership is considered as a key instrument of women's empowerment, one

which involves adopting different leadership styles, creating new visions, promoting social advocacy, and becoming agents of change in communities. Such female leadership has been described in terms of encouraging grassroots voices, thus highlighting issues of social (in)justice and the rights of vulnerable members of society. Empowerment is a primary objective, considering how it is about delegating power to the oppressed, by encouraging them to know their strengths and recognize their abilities as experts about their own lives (C. Reinelt 1994). In this struggle, female leaders have encouraged broad participation from their communities and believe in shared decision-making processes within their organizations.

The Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme 1995) emphasizes that women's "political" empowerment is not just about their full participation in such processes, but also their involvement in making decisions that shape people's lives. Most feminist activists stress that women's empowerment should also lead to men's liberation from false value systems and ideologies of oppression. Hence, collaboration is an important component of women's grassroots movements to achieve their goals and promote their agendas. In their collaborations, female leaders focus on communicating with other leaders and appreciating new or different ideas and opinions, encouraging discussions on and debates over these ideas, sharing information, building coalitions, and being more egalitarian in practice. Indirectly, their collaborative process empowers other women that have thus far lived in isolation, timidity, silence, and who lack channels for expressing views or opinions.

Here, the perceptions and applications of power and leadership styles are markedly different from those of men – female leaders in grassroots movements are found to adopt feminist leadership approaches (A. Herda-Rapp 1998: 343). We will discuss different types of political approaches below (that is, transactional and transformational politics, as well as the politics of peace). As it is, most female leaders are driven to join politics or activism because of their experiences as mothers or daughters – the first criterion of maternal politics involves safeguarding the survival and wellbeing of children or younger generations (S. Ruddick 1995). As leaders, maternal peace activists often speak in a "women's language", channelling not just their love and loyalty, but also their outrage and anger at the deprivation of the communities access to everyday resources. But to defend and protect the rights of their people, they have to break many androcentric expectations of femininity and motherhood.

Specific leadership styles

B. Alimo-Metcalfe (1995: 5-7) stresses the impact of gender differences in clearly constructing different leadership qualities by highlighting "transactional" and "transformational" leadership styles. These two concepts were initially introduced by J.M. Burns (1978) and elaborated upon by J. Rosener (1990), who suggests how leadership qualities are gender-linked. Men generally appear

to adopt transactional leadership criteria, instituting reward-and-punishment systems for employee performance while relying on their organizational positions and formal authority. Women, in contrast, are generally associated with transformational leadership, which is ascribed to their interpersonal skills or personal connections – our main focus in this discussion.

Briefly, K. Gilley's (1997) discussion of transformational leadership emphasizes how the future belongs to leaders who are self-aware, conscious, committed, and courageous, while A.H. Eagly and L.L. Carli (2003) describe this style as one which establishes leaders as role models: leading by example, they gain their followers' trust and confidence. Transformational leadership generally seeks to empower and enhance the effectiveness of organization members while striving to improve the lives of communities. C.M. Connor (2018) stresses that transformative politics requires applying strategies which focus on inclusiveness, collaboration, and the promotion of egalitarian environments. Among the important characteristics practiced in grassroots female leadership are that they are informed by social contexts and personal experiences, which enable further empowerment and effectiveness. Most female leaders do pay attention to their social contexts, which require flexibility, reflexivity, balance, and an ability to understand multiple perspectives, rather than simply engage in dichotomous thinking. They take responsibility for their actions and require self-accountability, characterizing their leadership by mutual respect, clear lines of communication, and the promotion of ethical actions. A transformational leader is capable of transforming and motivating subordinates to move away from considering their own self-interests while taking into account their groups' collective interests instead (Rosener 1990). This leadership style, which is more interactive, encourages participation, power- and information- sharing as well as enhances self-worth. Its general underlying principle is that people perform best when they feel good about themselves and understand the main objectives of a situation, and thus try to create constructive situations. In sum, transformational leaders set up their organizations' objectives and develop plans to achieve goals. By mentoring and empowering their followers, leaders help develop their potential, enabling them to contribute more effectively to their organizations, or motivate community members to accept and accomplish goals that would otherwise not have been pursued. Female leaders are seen as being more caring, nurturing, inclusive and collaborative in terms of their strategies, which in turn encourage grassroots participation (M.G. Fine 2007).

Regarding women followers in particular, charisma is key for changing their perspectives and inspiring them forward, besides providing knowledge and training as well as boosting confidence. In political terms, according to A.J. Dubinsky, F.J Yamarino, and A. Jolson (1995), transformational leaders adopt long-term approaches, focussing not just on current needs and issues but also future needs, observing an organization's or movement's issues from a broad perspective, rather than a narrow and rigid one. B.M. Bass (1985: 113-115) explains that such leaders increase their community's

confidence and awareness of the importance of a struggle's outcome, and their main characteristics are: (1) charisma (linked to vision and mission); (2) instilling pride; and (3) gaining a community's trust and respect. They inspire, communicate high expectations, use symbols to focus efforts, express important purposes straightforwardly, provide intellectual stimulation (in turn promoting intelligence, rationality, and problem-solving abilities), and engage in individualized considerations (for example, paying personal attention, providing personalized treatment to each organization member, coaching/advising).

Lastly, female leadership and maternal commitment are both based on voluntary and conscious action, which involves practising maternal feelings in leadership (such as being instinctual, nurturing, and caring); this links to women's involvement in the politics of resistance, in which its characteristics are (1) most participants are women; (2) these women explicitly use their culture's traits of femininity in political action; and (3) they reject masculine practices and patriarchal culture (Ruddick 1995). To sum up, women have adopted some female principles in their leadership styles, such as following their intuition in the decision-making process, nurturing, caring for others while simultaneously being mindful of their own agency and independence. In an evaluation of feminine leadership by C. Radu, A. Deaconu, and C. Fransineanu (2017: 68-69), women are generally found to be better at showing empathy, establishing good relationships within their organizations, and demonstrating "people skills" (for example, displaying sensitivity towards others, being kind, having good listening skills, successfully developing efficient organizational relationships). Comparing female to male leaders, A.H. Eagly and B.T. Johnson (1990: 569-571) suggest that women in real-world leadership positions adopt more democratic and participatory styles. Meanwhile, S. Walby (1986) acknowledges that female leaders face deeply embedded challenges and societal hurdles, including patriarchal values and gender or sexual discrimination, which seem almost impossible to eliminate.

Methodology

We utilized a qualitative research approach to explore female-led grassroots movements, including investigating their experiences with and visions for their organizations. Data were collected during the initial in-person, semi-structured interviews with participants (that is, JKOASM leaders and active members), which were recorded with their permission and informed consent was given by each participant. Later these interviews were transcribed verbatim by our research assistant and the transcripts were coded to determine major themes and subthemes. The participants from different communities also helped decipher specific terms and ideologies commonly used by and found among the OAs. This article required information from vulnerable and often oppressed members of Malaysian society, thus the researchers ensured participants that they had the option and right to withdraw from the study at any given time. While it was an initial option to consider using pseudonyms

for each participant, the members of JKOASM encouraged using their names as they were already known locally as environmental and indigenous activists.

The fieldwork was held in multiple phases and took approximately three months in total (from April 2018 to October 2019). During its initial stages, interviews were conducted in Kampung Chang Lama, Perak, mainly with JKOASM's chairperson, Tijah Yok Chopil (herself a Senoi from Perak), who also spoke about its activism. Later, she suggested that the research also consider information provided by Temiar members from Kelantan, many of whom actively protested a series of police and development blockades and whose community was often involved in protests pertaining to their customary land.

The second stage involved a series of open-ended interviews, specifically with female JKOASM leaders from the Semai, Temuan, and Semoq Beri communities, based in Perak, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang respectively. We conducted interviews in village community halls and homes, being interested in the oral histories of OA female leadership. Although there was a larger pool of interviews conducted here, primary data were also provided by the following participants, whose genders, locations, and sub-ethnic groups are listed in Table 1.

Name	Gender	Location	Sub-Ethnic Group
Mustafa Along	Male	Kaleeg Blockade and Chawas Blockade, Gua Musang, Kelantan (originally Kampung Kaloy, Pos Pasik) Gua Musang, Kelantan	Temiar and Senoi
Nora Kantin	Female	Kaleeg Blockade and Kampung Kaloi, Pos Pasik, Gua Musang, Kelantan	Temiar
Tijah Yok Chopil	Female	Kampung Chang Lama, Bidor, Perak	Senoi
Fatimah Bah Sin	Female	Kuala Lumpur (At the tenth indigenous land national conference)	Semoq Beri
Juli Lancung	Male	Kampung Sebir, Negeri Sembilan	Temiar
Asma Telan and Lela Telan (sisters)	Female	Kampung Sebir, Negeri Sembilan	Temiar
Alina Les	Female	Kampung Sebir, Negeri Sembilan	Temiar
Murni Liga	Female	Kampung Orang Asli Tering, Negeri Sembilan	Temuan

Table 1. Details of our interviewees, including gender, location, and sub-ethnic group.

THREE FEATURES OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

We outline three major themes raised by our interviewees below, with regard to female leadership in particular and OA grassroots movements in general. Mainly, the data indicate a common understanding of JKOASM's role and structure at the heart of the OA movement, the importance of women's participation and struggles in building the OA leadership, as well as the centrality of nature and land to indigenous agency.

1. AN ANTI-HIERARCHICAL, COMMUNITY-BASED MOVEMENT

All interviewees indicated that they did not see JKOASM as a formal organization, but instead as something more akin to a "leaderless" movement (this was an interesting observation for us, given the focus of our research on leadership) with a specific function and structure. Chopil explained that JKOASM did not have members in a formal sense, but rather supporters of this movement, one which was in harmony with the OA ethos of service and camaraderie, which she saw being reflected in their communal ceremonial affairs (for example, births, marriages, deaths) and farming activities. Being communal-based, it is effectively an extension of existing bonds of camaraderie. For a period of time, the group considered formalizing the organization in the hope of easing their interactions with the state government. However, the apparent hostility of certain government officers was frustrating and led them to reposition themselves.

> *Kami memang cuba untuk perbincangan dengan kerajaan negeri* [...] *malangnya (mereka) menolak kami sebagai satu NGO, haramlah* [...] *yang tidak berdaftar. Itu adalah alasan yang digunakan oleh kerajaan negeri untuk tidak berbincang dengan kami* [...] *kami bukanlah NGO berdaftar (untuk) apapun keuntungan. Kumpulan kami, merupakan gerakan masyarakat* [...] *dan apa yang kami bawa merupakan suara akar umbi.*

> 'We tried speaking to the state government [...] unfortunately they refused to speak to us because they viewed us as an illegal NGO [...] which had not been registered. That was the excuse given by the state government for not having discussions with us. We really aren't a registered NGO [seeking to gain] any profit. Our group is a community movement [...] and what we do is give a voice to grassroots opinions.'

Some interviewees considered the behaviour of the officials as a form of intimidation directed towards their movement or as an attempt to belittle their general plight, which had the opposite effect on the OA community. Collectively, the interviewees mentioned incidents of intimidation, not just external (that is, from the police and politicians) but also internal in origin. Specifically, internal actions came from the *Tok Batin* (village head), whose position included a state allowance, and who enabled external intimidation to occur. According to the sisters Asma Telan and Lela Telan, given that a number of their programmes had seen intervention by the authorities, they had long suspected their *Tok Batin* and other village leaders of being government informants. Asma explained her suspicions as follows:

Mesti ada prosedur yang mereka harus setia kepada JAKOA. Mereka itulah yang mata-mata yang akan merepot seluruh hal [...] supaya kita dipintas, supaya tak jadi apa-apa yang kita buat. Sebab Tok Batin sudah diikat elaun. Seperti cucuk hidung lah. Kamu kena ikut suara-suara yang diluar sana. Tapi bukan suara-suara penduduk kampung yang menderita itu sendiri. Aku dapat (RM) 1,000 sebulan okay je, kan? Tapi penduduk dia macam mana?

'There must be some JAKOA procedures to which they are committed. They have become spies, reporting on everything that happens [...] so that we are intercepted, and our planned actions are prevented. Because the *Tok Batin* are shackled to their monthly allowance. They are being "led by the nose" [coerced]. I must heed the opinions of outsiders, [but not opinions of the suffering villagers themselves] because I am paid RM 1,000 a month, so all is well, right? But what about the villagers?'

The rejection of their movement by the state authorities meant that other challenges would follow. Those who were politically aligned with the ruling coalition also painted members of JKOASM as being anti-establishment in orientation and as supporters of the opposition. Fatimah Bah Sin, a Semoq Beri from Pahang, explained that, despite working to empower fellow members of her sub-ethnic group in demanding better living assistance, their movement was constantly accused of leading the broader OA community astray.

Satu cabaran yang paling besar [...] dekat kampung saya ialah orang yang pro-kerajaan dulu lah [...] diorang akan buat JKOASM ni macam pembangkang [...] Pastu, suka memecahkan belah Orang Asli.

'One of the greatest challenges [...] in my village is how pro-government individuals used to accuse JKOASM of being a sort of political opposition [...] [saying that] that we wanted to divide the OA.'

Other challenges have emerged, this time from activist circles. JKOASM has also been dismissed as being incapable of leading grassroots movements, given its lack of structure and system, and Chopil was critical of several activist groups (some of which included scholar-activists) and JAKOA itself. By being condescending and dismissive of JKOASM's community engagement, these dismissals made grassroots work much harder.

Diorang anggap kita musuh, boleh katakan macam tu. Diorang pandang rendah dengan JKOASM [...] Diorang confuse-kan komuniti [...] Bila kita dah ajar dengan komuniti [...] mereka datang cakap lain, jadi komuniti menjadi confused. Mereka selalu kata, JKOASM hala tuju dia tak tentu arah, takde hala tuju. Jadi kita kena tubuhkan pertubuhan ini untuk membetulkan hala tuju Orang Asli.

'You could say they consider us the enemy. They look down on JKOASM [...] They confuse the community. When we educate the community [...] they will raise objections and doing so confuses our community. They would often say, JKOASM's aims are questionable, and that we are directionless. Therefore, we have to start this movement to correct the course for the OA.'

In a separate incident, Juli Lancung, a male Temiar ally from Negeri Sembilan, experienced being sabotaged by pro-government activists and JAKOA officers. These acts of sabotage are not uncommon and have often been previously experienced in the form of intimidation and threats made by hired goons. These incidents led to fellow OA villagers ostracizing JKOASM members, labelling them "anti-development" and a hindrance to the progress of the OA community. This particular episode was done in favour of JAKOA-led ones, and resulting in JKOASM having had to delay its own OA development projects.

> *Dia memang halang, memang dia menyekat pergerakan kita ni. Dia kata dekat orang kampung melalui JAKOA lah kan, kamu orang jangan ikut kumpulan ini [JKOASM], dia ini kumpulan pemecah belah [...] JAKOA kata jaringan ini [...] akan menyusahkan lagi pembangunan, kerajaan nak membangunkan Orang Asli.*

> 'They definitely tried to stop our movement. They asked villagers to only work with JAKOA, and ordered them not to join this group [that is, JKOASM], and accused us of being divisive [...] JAKOA members have said this movement [...] has made pursuing development here more difficult, [despite how] the government wants to help the OA develop.'

Despite these setbacks, the movement slowly grew through word-of-mouth. Chopil attributed this growth to a sharpened perception of how grassroots communities are victims of capitalist and classist systems created by those who have wealth, education, and power. Many villagers who began to understand this dynamic found JKOASM to be an appealing way of fighting for their rights. For others, the movement was also a way of championing rural village life and traditional knowledge against state power. Lancung explained that they were *masyarakat kampung* (village folk) who were *bukannya belajar tinggi-tinggi* (not highly educated), but after *habis bincang* (having discussions with each other), they decided to form a *jaringan antara kampung-kampung* Orang Asli (network between the OA villages). This resulting network is seen to be flourishing by its members, simply because it remains people-led. Despite only being an informal coalition, its members see how they have power in unity and, despite challenges on the ground, it has gained sufficient traction with the broader OA community. Bah Sin explained that, although JKOASM is not formally registered as an NGO, the movement continues to impact indigenous people.

> *NGO yang berdaftar, kalau kerajaan tak dengar cakap dia pun, tetap dia tak dengar. Bagi saya, perjuangan kita fokus kepada situ. Sama ada kita berdaftar atau tidak berdaftar [...] Lagipun saya tengok, JKOASM, walaupun tak berdaftar, ada jugak orang yang kerajaan [...] nak dengar keluhan JKOASM [...] JKOASM pun, dah ke Geneva. Itu yang saya respect dekat JKOASM.*

'Even if NGOs are registered, if the government continues to ignore them, they would still not have a voice. In my opinion, our fight is clear. Regardless of whether or not we are formalized [...] To me, despite JKOASM not being a registered NGO, there are still government officials who have [...] attended to our concerns. JKOASM has even been to Geneva. And that is why I respect the movement.'

Chopil added that the essence of a leaderless grassroots movement would not survive being encased in rigid structures, and that membership was the result of *keinginan komuniti melindungi sesuatu* (the desire of the community to protect something). Because these desires are not constant, however, membership of JKOASM is loose and *ad hoc*. Villagers should not feel that they are being coerced in terms of their commitment to joining the movement, and members will be welcomed back into JKOASM-led missions even if they choose to take a break from the group. Ultimately, JKOASM is seen by its members as a successful example of a "leaderless", anti-hierarchical movement. Alina Les, also a Temiar from Negeri Sembilan, said that, through such a system, ordinary OA who were normally excluded from opportunities to become leaders could be given such opportunities, and without politics to muddy their pursuit of a common goal, it was easier to work towards the community's collective empowerment.

> *Dalam JKOASM, semua tu kita ketua. (Semua) berkemampuan, semua rasa ada tanggungjawab kan. Takde nak serah kepada seorang kan. Jadi bila masa semua tu macam ketua, wah, rasa hebat lah. Masing-masing buat kerja.*

> 'In JKOASM, everyone is a leader. [Everyone] is capable, everyone has a responsibility. We do not have to leave it up to a single person. When everyone is capable of being a leader, wow, it feels great. Everybody has their own role.'

2. Women and grassroots leadership

In line with our theoretical and conceptual framework, JKOASM's championing of leadership actions through acts of care, compassion, nurturance, and training comes through in the interviews, which reveal how respondents are able to identify ways to empower both men and women in their communities. The creation of stronger and more assertive female leadership roles in the OA community began with the recognition that existing patriarchal structures had failed to bring about real change. Chopil recalled attending meetings with fellow villagers which aimed to discuss village concerns, such as access to basic amenities and developmental issues – the latter required representatives or community leaders to communicate effectively with government agencies. All these leaders were traditionally men, most of whom had been lacklustre in terms of their leadership track records. Chopil also noted that these men had done very little to promote their people's rights or champion them.

Saya cakap, dulu, komuniti Orang Asli telah serahkan kepimpinan komuniti untuk menerajui hala tuju komuniti Orang Asli kepada kaum lelaki. Tapi, kamu tengok berjaya tak? Gagal kan? Lelaki tak capai apa pun.

'To me, in the past, the OA community entrusted its leadership to men, in deciding on its collective direction. But have they succeeded? They've failed haven't they? These men have achieved nothing.'

The issue here was that the ongoing, male-led legacy at the village level meant that women never gained opportunities to learn to lead from their predecessors, which led to OA leadership being continuously locked in a patriarchal cycle. Chopil's concerns were that, even within individual family units, women were still not seen as being capable of leading the community, despite showing how they were capable of bearing heavy domestic burdens.

Saya kata, sebab kalau tiba-tiba abang mati, siapa yang akan jadi pemimpin dalam keluarga? Siapa yang akan perjuangkan nasib anak-anak? Kamu kena ingat. Kalau kamu orang […] biarkan lelaki putuskan apa yang bagus untuk masa depan kamu orang, orang perempuan lah yang paling gagal dalam hidup kita nanti.

'I said to them, if all of you died suddenly, who will lead the family? Who will fight for your children's rights? You must realize this fact. If you continue […] to only let men decide upon the betterment of your community's future, then it is the women who are fated to be the biggest losers.'

An example shared by Chopil was the ongoing issue of uncontrolled logging at Gua Musang, Kelantan, which reportedly endangered the lives of approximately 2,000 Temiar living in ten villages in the vicinity (*Malay Mail* 2019). Given that logging had caused significant environmental degradation, Chopil argued that, by considering the losses of jobs and ancestral land, only the provision of land grants by the government (an action that was often delayed or conveniently forgotten) could secure her people's position in the area by returning stewardship of the land back to the OA community. But when (and if) land grants are ever provisioned, Chopil expressed concern about how it continues to be mostly men who are nominated as the landowners of indigenous lands and rarely women, thus reducing women to *penumpang* (passengers, passively having to go along) in their fight for agency. She suggested that this bias occurs because women always have to demand places in OA movements and do not have a chance to contribute to the conversation.

Apabila perempuan terlibat dalam perjuangan, kita boleh nampak perkembangan dia. Memang lah, tak berjaya tapi perkembangan dari segi kekuatan, keperkasaan, suara kita; isu kita lebih terangkat ke atas.

'When women participate in the struggle, we will be able to see its further development. Of course, the struggle hasn't succeeded yet, but there is development in terms of its overall strength, bravery, vocalness; we're better at raising our issues.'

For Bah Sin, in light of women's supposed inferiority within their community, she felt that she needed to be a catalyst for change and to encourage fellow women to speak up despite their social shortcomings. She explained that NGOs had organized meetings and programmes, having visited her village to conduct leadership training or community engagement programmes. Like many of the other women, she was initially reluctant to participate: "*kita ni kan bukan berpendidikan tinggi, kita takde pangkat, kita takde darjat*" ("We are not educated, we have no position, we have no status"). However, she eventually realized that, after years of neglect, women had to start somewhere, even if from a difficult position – and that even other women, in similar situations to her, might want to participate as well.

> *Saya kena buat. Saya nak [...] tau jugak perkara tu. Jadi tanyalah. (Ada) kawan-kawan kita [...] di kalangan kita sendiri [...] banyaklah macam tohmahan yang bukan-bukan lah. Memang banyak. (Tapi) akak tak kisah [...] Kita perlu yang ada pada diri kita, kita harus bertanya.*

> 'I had to do it. I wanted to know about these things. So I asked questions. [There are] friends of ours [...] among us [...] who have so many negative things to say. A lot. [But] I don't care [...]. We have to trust ourselves, we have to ask.'

Nora Kantin, a Temiar from Kelantan, agreed and admitted that, for many women, their reluctance to bring about change in the OA community stems from their respect for and fear of their husbands. *Mereka takut. Tulah halangan diorang* (They are frightened. That is the challenge for them). However, Kantin used this reluctance as an opportunity to effect change and, in speaking to other women in her community, she often explained that they have and always had their rights – and that the only way to create a stronger and more developed community was by becoming their husbands' equals. Like Bah Sin, Kantin tried to encourage as many women and their husbands to participate in the community engagement and training programmes offered by civil society groups in the village.

> *Saya dah bagitau [...] kalau ada program, kita sama-sama bincang sama dengan suami. Kalau suami tak bagi, kita soal kepada dia [...]. Kita kan ada hak. Kenapa apa, suami larang kita?*

> 'As I said to them [...] if there is a programme, we should discuss them with our husbands. If our husbands do not allow us to participate, we should ask them why not [...]. We have our rights. Why should our husbands prevent us from participating?'

Kantin's stance indicates an obvious call to pursue gender equality within the movement, beginning with a female-centric reclamation of agency. Bah Sin alluded to this pursuit by using an analogy. The men, in their negotiations over land rights or social problems, were often seen as *ada api* (lit. 'to have fire' or 'be heated up'), a term commonly used to mean aggressive or were quick to lose their temper, which often caused discussions to end in deadlock. Most of

the women in her community knew about this tendency and reminded male leaders to consider having women in these dialogues. Men would generally be cautious about their tempers when women were seated at the discussion table. If enough women were in attendance, then they would be able to counter the aggressive male behaviour.

> *Bila dengan perempuan, walaupun dia nak marah ke apa, dia* [...] *tak boleh nak marah. Kebanyakannya, wanita Orang Asli yang hentam mereka pulak. Kita cakap, macam biasa lah. Tapi tengok reaksi dia bila dia dah nampak nak marah, kita pun terus hentam, ataupun kita bagi cairkan dia.*

> 'When the women are there, even if the men are upset, they [...] cannot lose their tempers. In fact, the OA women would be the ones to tell them off. We will speak civilly, as expected. But if we notice an aggressive reaction from them, we would either tell them off or defuse the situation.'

For Murni Liga, a Temuan from Negeri Sembilan, the first instance of her becoming more assertive as a woman happened when developers entered her village unannounced sometime in the past decade. She had always been warned by the men in the community that such a situation could occur when the men were out working, thus leaving the women vulnerable. While the thought of such a situation once frightened her during her youth, she rallied together with other women and decided that the only solution was *ke hadapan bersuara lah* (to go forward and speak up). She believed that many other women in her village felt the same way and were prepared to act alone without the men as the situation demanded.

> *Kalau andaikata* [...] *dekat kampung, pagi-pagi, lelaki tak ada dekat rumah. Hanya kaum wanita. Dan ada projek dekat luar, tiba-tiba masuk. Wanita beranilah ke depan. Dia takde duduk diam saja, tengok jentera masuk, semua-semua orang masuk. Dia akan lagi berani bersuara.*

> 'Assuming that [...] in the village, early in the morning when all the men are not at home. Only the women are there. And suddenly, a group of developers enter. The women are the ones who must be brave enough to confront them. They will not sit quietly, and allow the bulldozers and all these people in. They will be emboldened to speak up.'

And so began the effort of community-building and leadership training among OA women, directed at elevating them as equal partners in the struggle for indigenous rights. Kantin saw these actions as necessary for empowering more female leaders to help grow grassroots movements; her aim was to host as many *bengkel wanita supaya tarik ramai wanita (untuk) berani bersuara* (women's workshops to encourage more women to speak up). But to do so, she would first have to be willing to attend training by civil society organizations before she could develop learning aids for the women back home. These sessions were crucial for her, since they involved not only learning new information about rights and historical issues pertaining to the OA but also suggested ways of

participating in grassroots movements and encouraging others to join them. Kantin made it a point to join as many programmes as possible and soon, as the number of OA women interested in obtaining such training increased, she noticed more training workshops catering to them.

> *Saya belajar dari situlah; kita wanita Orang Asli boleh bercakap, kita wanita Orang Asli boleh bebas. Dulu saya ingat, kita Orang Asli tak boleh keluar ke bandar. Tapi banyak saya menyertai program mereka, belajar itu ini* [...] *Teruslah apabila pihak lelaki membuat* blockade *(masuk ke kampung) saya pun teruslah berjuang bersama-sama.*

> 'I learned so much there; that we OA women can speak up, that we can be free. I used to think that as an OA, I wasn't even allowed to go into town. But after participating in these programmes, and learning this and that [...]. When the men built blockades [at the entrances to the village] I could join them.'

Later, as a member of JKOASM, Kantin played an important role in the training structure for other OA women, like others interviewed in this article. She introduced a more localized vocabulary and also gained the interest of and support from many other OA residents. While it initially seemed a daunting prospect, Bah Sin explained that learning about indigenous history and rights together with friends at JKOASM ultimately needed just their patience and time. She likened the experience to *mendidik anak kita di rumah* (teaching our children back at home) about the need for routine and discipline, explaining that it sometimes meant *ambik perkara yang paling mudah* (starting with the simplest ideas). Once the initial barrier or resistance towards starting is broken, *dia bukan perkara yang susah* (it is not actually a difficult thing). Those who joined JKOASM also began to combine their activism with community support, especially that which was directed towards women and children. For Chopil, this involved speaking to women, which allowed them also to offer assistance to those who were suffering. This was important for creating a spirit of togetherness and camaraderie that was crucial for strengthening their community, at least to her.

> *Kalau ada ibu yang kekurangan makanan, kita collect-collect sikit makanan bagi dia. Untuk lebih mengikat mereka, untuk* [...] *dekat sama satu sama lain lah.*

> 'If there are mothers who do not have enough food at home, we would collect food amongst ourselves for her. This is to unify us, to [...] bring us closer together.'

Despite the strong female-centred agenda held by the women we interviewed, there was also an element which involved creating male allies. In the spirit of nurturing and uniting themselves, the women expressed a clear need for men as allies of women leaders and to support them wherever possible. Chopil, as a pioneer of the grassroots movements, attended many meetings where men were uncomfortable with the presence of women in the room and said that they were *selalu marah* (always angry). Although she would remind them that women were just as deserving of being in the same meeting room as the men,

as they were in the kitchen, she soon realized that a more inspiring strategy was needed. Speaking to eager mothers in the village, they collectively decided that the best way of contributing to the community was for the wives to repeatedly communicate their interest in the cause to their husbands. Eventually, this strategy worked – instead of the women being seen as "gatecrashing" the men's meetings, these became hospitable spaces where couples could come together for a common cause. For Chopil, it was clear that the success of the movement needed men to stand alongside women as equal partners.

> *Saya tak setuju* [...] *kalau isu Orang Asli (cuma) memperkasa perempuan dan tinggalkan lelaki. Isu Orang Asli harus ada gabungan semua dalam komuniti untuk menangani (masalah). (Kalau) hanya perempuan saja yang mendahului pun takkan berjaya. Kalau hanya lelaki saja, pun tak akan berjaya. Mesti, dua-dua pihak.*

> 'I do not agree [...] that OA issues are only about empowering women and neglecting men. OA issues require community-level unity to tackle [problems]. [If] only the women are in a position of leadership, we would not succeed. If only the men are made leaders, they would not succeed either. Both parties must work together.'

This principle has, of course, attracted male allies from within the OA community, who joined JKOASM in support of greater equality and change. Inspired by the work of the women in his community, Mustafa Along, a Temiar from Kelantan, said that he had long noticed how much the women had done to help his community, but their efforts were often unrecognized. With time, he learned that it was important to openly mention how, despite their ingrained *pemalu* (shy) and *tak menonjol* (inconspicuous) demeanour, women were indeed the *tulang belakang* (backbone) of the community.

> *Saya berani cakap bahawa perjuangan takkan sampai ke mana-mana tanpa sokongan yang kuat daripada kaum wanita. (Mereka) adalah penyumbang kepada kejayaan. Memang mereka tidak bercakap, (tetapi) mereka (juga) tak ada ruangan khas lah untuk suarakan pendapat. Bukan larangan dalam komuniti, cuma kaum wanita ni tadi letakkan diri mereka jauh kebelakang berbanding lelaki.*

> 'I can openly say that our fight would not have come this far without the strong support of the women. [They] are a major factor for our success. Of course, they do not say much, [but] they [also] do not have a platform for voicing their opinions. It isn't taboo to speak up in our community, but women have always been made to feel inferior to their husbands.'

His participation, that is, working together with female grassroots leaders, revealed how many women in the community wanted to participate in grassroots movements and how many had the potential to become great leaders. Unless their husbands were open to their participation, and other outlets for women were created, however, many would continue keeping silent. Thus, along saw the need to be part of the change, so that women could take on leadership roles in his village.

3. Centralizing land and nature in indigenous agency

Lastly, our findings indicate that female leadership amongst the OA is closely connected with nature. Land, as has often been expressed in other scholarship, holds a strong significance with regard to one's identity and sense of belonging (K.S. Fadzil 2010; Nicholas, 1997). With that in mind, the ethos of female-led grassroots movements remains focussed on embracing a lifestyle and communal identity that is deeply rooted in land-based activities, such as farming, hunting, and other survival practices. Along explained that their *hidup pedalaman* (rural lifestyle) makes it almost impossible to *hidup sepertimana di bandar* (live like city-folk), given that they are committed to traditional indigenous swidden agriculture, such as *berkebun kecil-kecilan* (small-scale farming), where his community is involved in *tanam ubi kayu, tanam padi huma untuk penanaman bergilir* (agriculture based on crop rotations involving cassava and hill paddy). There are also non-survival aspects of their land-based practices, including cultural, traditional, and spiritual customs. Liga, who echoed Along's point about the incompatibility of OA and urban lifestyles, discussed Temuan spiritual beliefs and shared how their ancestral land was important for making a living, keeping the community healthy and offering sacred links.

> *Sebab tanah ni* [...] *kami bercucuk tanam. Kami mencari herba. Macam kat hutan tu, kami punya pasar. Kami punya farmasi.* [...]. *Kami bergantung pada tanah. Kalau takde tanah, memang tak berfungsi* [...] *bagi kami, bandar ni takde apa. Tapi kami lebih suka lah (sebab) dari nenek moyang kami dulu, memang kami di situ. Memang jiwa kami di situlah. Umpama hutan ni kami punya nafas. Tanpa hutan, memang rasa tak boleh bernafas.*

> 'It is because of this land [...] that we cultivate it. We farm. We forage for herbs. The jungle is our market. It is our pharmacy [...]. We depend on this land. If we do not have land, we cannot function [...] to us, towns mean nothing. And we prefer it here (because), even from the time of our ancestors, we were already here. Our soul is here. The jungle is our breath. Without the jungle, we cannot breathe.'

In spite of the criticism levied against the relative lack of progress amongst the OA compared to Malaysians at large, our interviewees felt this was somewhat beneficial to maintaining the existing networks of natural structures and systems, all of which are intrinsic to the ethos as an OA person. This understanding of nature and the jungle is explained by Alina Les, also a Temiar and a friend of the sisters Asma and Lela, and someone who could provide an *akademik dalaman* (insider academic's perspective). Also like Asma and Lela, Alina is a teacher for indigenous children and pre-schoolers, and has been teaching introductory indigenous knowledge to her students for years; this includes a basic understanding of the local flora and fauna in the jungle. The privilege of her position has earned her the title of "guru" (teacher) by parents in her village and in her interview, she indicated that "*semua penduduk kampung* [...] *tidak berpendidikan tinggi*" ("the villagers … did not have any formal higher education"), but they had been educated in *kehidupan Asli* (the OA lifestyle), including blowpipe-shooting as well as foraging for wild herbs

and vegetation. The knowledge gained from the jungle was important and *takde hutan, takde tanah, (tiada) Orang Asli yang punya akademik ni, akan susah kehidupan dia* (without the jungle, without the land, [there won't be any] indigenous knowledge, and therefore the OAs would suffer). She further explained that there is an important ethical code that must be respected in this knowledge system – one must abide by the rules of empathy and mutual respect for other inhabitants of the land as well as nature itself.

> *Seluas mata kita, seluas mana kita menjelajah itu saja. Kalau itu dah sepadan orang lain, kita tak jelajah. Itu rezeki saudara sana, kan? Ini rezeki kita di sini, kita jelajah di sini. Sebab tu kita kena* mapping *kawasan kita … Petai hutan ada, madu lebah ada, rotan ada … kemenyan ada di sana kan … kayu gaharunya ada … Itu kan sumber rezeki Orang Asli.*

> 'As far as the eye can see, that is how far we may tread. But if it encroaches upon someone else's territory, then we must not enter it. Those constitute their livelihoods, yes? Ours is here, and so we tread here. That is why we must map out our territory … We have forest bitter beans, wild honey, rattan … aromatic tree resin … and also agarwood … all these resources contribute to OA livelihood.'

Violations of and encroachments upon their ancestral lands have severe implications for their livelihoods and lifestyles. Chopil noted that, often, these violations started out some years, if not decades ago, and went mostly unnoticed by OA communities. Citing communities in Melaka, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor, among other states, she explained that these communities were kept in the dark over the status of their ancestral lands and, by the time they realized what had happened, they had lost their rights and livelihoods. Even though numerous, well-known organizations rallied behind these communities, it was too late to change anything because development work had already begun.

These tragedies became an important teachable moment and reminded her that the OA had to self-educate themselves on their rights, which were a necessity for their survival if they did not want to be continuously *tergadai* (lit., 'pawned'). Along had a similar response and referenced ancestral lands, such as *kubur-kubur nenek moyang* (the graves of ancestors) that have now all disappeared, thus making their claims to these spaces difficult. When the authorities asked about evidence of their ties to the land, they only had these long-devastated gravesites.

> *Bila kita nak cakap kita orang pertama di sana kita boleh harus tunjukkan bukti-bukti sejarahlah nenek moyang kita yang kita kebumikan* [...] *Jadi, bila benda ini musnah* [...] *bukti penempatan kita yang sekian lama di sana pun hilang.*

> 'When we say we were the original inhabitants of the land, we are required to show evidence of the history of our ancestors whom we buried […]. And so when they have been destroyed […] the proof of our claim disappears along with them.'

And so, when the OA community (especially those living in rural areas) are robbed of these sacred sites, they feel even more threatened because they

continue to lose access to other aspects of their land, particularly farming, foraging, and hunting. Along also recounted previous experiences when loggers would enter their village without consent and how his people felt a huge *kerugian* (loss). He elaborated that this loss was not only monetary but also a *kerugian pengalaman, pengetahuan adat, tradisi, budaya* (loss of experiences, customary knowledge, traditions, and culture). Practices such as the *adat menjamu semangat nenek moyang* (the customary rites of feasting on the ancestors' spirits) and New Year celebrations would be greatly affected. More importantly, a non-consensual encroachment upon and violation of these ancestral lands meant that their most personal sense of belonging could vanish; as Along explained "*kami juga kehilangan jati dirilah*" ("We lose our unique identity, you see).

Along recognized that fighting for change would take considerable effort from his community. Part of the new approach by those in JKOASM is to remind the community of the importance of not just seeing the jungle as an asset for financial stability, but also to be *dijaga, dipelihara* (protected and defended). He shared that, as a proponent of indigenous knowledge, he and many members of his community have stopped commodifying their ancestral land and begun familiarizing themselves and their children with the way of the jungle.

> *Kita tak tau apa tertanam rahsia dalam hutan itu, sebab kita tak pernah jalankan kajian. Kami tak pernah bantah yang balak tu tak boleh tebang langsung. Pada kami, kami mahu apa-apa pun pembangunan itu dijalankan secara berhemah. Hutan itu adalah untuk kenikmatan bersama. Hutan itu adalah khazanah. Hutan itu adalah amanah Tuhan kepada kita.*

> 'We do not know about secrets buried deep in the jungle, because we have never researched it. We have also not resisted the chopping of timber which should never have happened. To us, we welcome any development so long as it is ethically done. The jungle is a pleasure for all of us to share. The jungle is a treasure. The jungle is God's gift to us.'

For Bah Sin, OA advocacy required them to think realistically about future leaders, and thus she has voiced the need to involve younger OA in this effort. JKOASM's focus has to centre on access to education and healthcare. Only by doing so could younger members of the community be able to defend their land. She also agonized over the possibility of OA youths being driven off their land, which would thus strip them off their identity and heritage.

> *Saya nak generasi akan datang terus berjuang untuk hak tanah lah.* [...] *(untuk) lahir anak-anak muda yang sedar kepentingan tanah itu* [...] *Kita tak nak generasi akan datang, Orang Asli duduk di bawah jambatan. Duduk, jadi pengemis di jalanan* [...] *pengemis di bumi sendiri lah. Wanita terutamanya, (boleh) bangkit berjuang, (juga) untuk menyedarkan generasi akan datang.*

> 'I want future generations to continue fighting for our land rights [...] [and to] give birth to youths who understand the importance of our land [...] We do not want future OA generations to be living under a bridge. To become beggars [...] on our own land. Women especially, [can] rise up to protest, [but also] create awareness for these future generations.'

The OA leaders interviewed placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of maintaining and protecting the land for their children, a theme which resonates heavily in all the interviews that we conducted. Within their close-knit community, these leaders have continued to find ways to educate and remind their community about the struggles to defend their ancestral land. Knowledge is passed down to younger cohorts during religious gatherings and community engagement programmes, or even through songs and other OA oral traditions. Chopil, who often hosted poetry readings and singing sessions during OA gatherings, personally composed children's songs in the belief that one day, the "right" message would be ingrained in the children.

> *Saya cipta lagu yang bersesuaian untuk kanak-kanak Orang Asli lah. Salah satu lirik saya cakap, kita tengok hutan belantara, air mata kita akan mengalir sebab belantara kita akan hangus terbakar, menjadi padang jarak padang terkukur lah. Lama-lama, bila budak-budak nyanyi kan, dia jatuh kepada orang remaja, kepada orang tua.*

> 'I wrote a song suitable for OA children. Part of the lyrics involved lines that called on us to look at our jungle, and our tears would flow because the jungle would be burnt down, and it would become a wasteland. With time, the children who sing it the song will remain with them as they become teenagers and later adults.'

Ultimately, these grassroots leaders have made the protection of nature and land *not just* a central theme in their leadership within the movement but *also* a framework which they follow closely. Together with the other aspects of this movement, including "leaderless", non-hierarchical structures and utilizing maternal thinking, it is apparent that community, as well as elements of togetherness and compassion, are positioned as active modes of social change.

CONCLUSION

The OA community has for decades been subject to exploitation and manipulation by unscrupulous parties. Several provisions in the Federal Constitution meant to protect the OAs have failed to prevent the violation and neglect of their rights, leading to land-grabs by capitalists and elites, aside from multiple social injustices. But these seizures have particularly affected the OA sense of belonging and identity, traditional and cultural practices, as well as their livelihoods, linked in turn to their lack of sustainable development opportunities and other basic necessities (for example access to quality healthcare and education for children, basic safety structures for women). While it is commendable just how much the OA community has rallied against these injustices, aided by allies from civil society groups, NGOs

and individuals, the reality is that they continue to be incredibly overlooked and neglected compared with other Malaysian communities.

The systemic injustices faced have been explored by many scholars from political, legal and socioeconomic standpoints. Their explorations suggest not just obstruction and destruction by external forces (for example, government agencies, development companies, international investors) but also internal forces, thus highlighting archaic patriarchal structures, in particular long-serving local male leadership. Therefore, this paper highlights how inclusive and community-led movements, spearheaded by mostly women leaders, have begun to change the language of resistance, empowerment, and agency despite an entrenched and internalized patriarchy. From our interviews, a new generation of female leaders and allies have been inspired to speak up, all of whom are: (1) committed to non-hierarchical communal efforts through JKOASM; (2) equality for female heads and maternally influenced leadership; as well as (3) centring nature and land in their overall fight for change.

Our participants shared how they adopted a new model of resistance harking back to their "original" ways, such as using apparently "leaderless" movements, to overcome government oppression which seeks to thwart attempts at seeking agency. We also learned how the rise of women leaders occurred inclusively, that is, by including men in the process and focusing on less confrontational approaches to empower their communities as a whole. By *uniting but avoiding* having a single clear leader, they have been able to stall the state's efforts to disrupt and delegitimize their mission. Following this (and just as importantly), revitalized attention to their ancestral lands has emerged. While both the state and the general populace stereotype the OA community as being "anti-development", ironically, they do not afford the community sufficient land to live off. Critics have pointed out how the duplicitous and disingenuous accusations lobbed at tribal communities accuse them of rejecting development (when it was summarily denied) while destroying the traditional spaces in which their lifestyles persist.

The OA community remains under siege. More encroachments upon their ancestral lands keep occurring, with several instances of communities resisting developers in nonviolent ways. Oftentimes, they have no support from state and federal governments, some of which go as far as to deny their birth rights. But the female-led JKOASM movement is a reminder that OA women are worthy leaders, capable of mobilizing fellow OAs not only to protect their cultural and traditional heritage but also in moving towards a stable, sustainable, and thriving ecosystem.

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