The Orang Asli of Malaysia
A Linguistic Perspective

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The Orang Asli and Others

Introduction

Orang Asli (original people) is a Malay term currently in use for small ethnolinguistic groups living on mainland Malay Peninsula and the islands around it. It is a direct translation of the English word aborigines, but this label was strictly used by the British to refer only to those living on the mainland. Those living on the islands and roamed the seas were seen as a separate group and were called “sea-people” or “sea-gypsies”. For this latter group, Malays in Malaysia and Indonesia had been privy to the term orang laut (sea-people), sometimes spell as orang lawat in older literature. The Malays of the peninsula did not have any word in their lexicon to refer to the aborigines living on land whom they had known and perceived as tribes of the jungles close to their villages. It was the British who gave these people the label “aborigines”.

In this introductory chapter, it is necessary that the concept of “aborigines” or Orang Asli is explained with regard to its usage in Malaysia, especially in the context of the whole population who are citizens of the country. This is not the same as saying that there are multiple meanings in this word. The basic meaning is there, that is “origin” (asli), and hence people who are referred to as aborigines of a country are the original people of that country.

Not all countries of the world use the term aborigines to refer to any group of their peoples, although there may be agreement as to who the original people are vis-à-vis those who came later. The label preferred is native. But in a number of cases, this term also means nationality or citizenship. For example, The New Oxford Dictionary of English defines Englishman as “a male native or national of England, or
In the preparation of this volume, approaches in the analysis of data and language corpora have been able to shed light on aspects of the speech systems of the Orang Asli of the Malay Peninsula. The outcome of treating linguistic data in the synchronic and diachronic dimensions has enabled the writers to render interpretations not only of the micro-aspects of their languages, but just as important on the relationship between the various groups and sub-groups. Linguistic evidence does not support such division between Proto-Malays and Deutero Malays. While Orang Laut has been placed in the category of aborigines prone to life in the seas as opposed to land Orang Asli, history has shown that what are known as sea and land people were not fixed categories, as there had been changes in their geolinguistic status due the freedom they had in moving from one region to the other.