



Both photos Vincent Houben



A group of Semelai women at Tasik Bera (Pahang, Malaysia).

Boats of Semelai at Tasik Bera

# Tribal Communities in the Malay World

In all area studies, studies of communities that ill fit dominant organizational forms, such as national states or world regions, have increased in importance. Research on minority groups in Southeast Asia has also blossomed in the past decade, producing a new field of cross-border, ethno-historical studies. Very few books, however, have tried to explain the development of tribal communities from a multidisciplinary, intra-regional comparative perspective. This volume, edited by Geoffrey Benjamin and Cynthia Chou, is therefore highly recommended.

Review >  
Southeast Asia

By Vincent Houben

The book's unit of analysis encompasses a narrowed 'Malay world': South Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra, Singapore, and Sarawak, home to numerous tribal groups ranging from established peasants to seafaring nomads. The volume addresses recent theoretical issues – internal differentiation, cultural contestation and negotia-

tion, alternative forms of modernity beyond assimilation – and discusses them in their particular political contexts, be it the premodern *kerajaan* or the present-day nation state. The book consists of a 70-page theoretical introduction on tribality in the Alam Melayu, and 18 case studies, derived from contributions by experts from Asia, the United States, and Europe to a conference held in Singapore in 1997.

The state-of-the-art theoretical introduction by Geoffrey Benjamin is among the best available. In a meticulously systematic manner, it discusses the many implications of tribality, Malay-ness, and their inter-connections. 'Tribal' here is intended as a non-discriminatory label to characterize a particular way of life and social organization. The term should not be seen as an ethnic category but as a culturally mediated social strategy within the broader state-led 'civilizing process'. An example from Juli Edo's contribution shows how this state influence manifested itself when the Semai, upon the Malay rulers' request, adopted a more settled lifestyle at the beginning of the twentieth century.

But tribality is more than a social strategy. 'Tribes' have become sub-nuclear societies in themselves, with lifestyles distinct from the majority of peasants. The Malay world is thus argued to be a singular place, where (re)tribalization

develops within a shared cultural and linguistic matrix. In this manner the Malay world has moved from a structuralist ethnological to a 'sociological' field of study, representing a 'Malayic societal pattern' (p.39). This social pattern has distinctive features, such as the combination of swidden farming, intensified gathering together with a sexual division of labour, and a large degree of complementarity between tribal communities and adjacent non-tribal peoples.

Apart from drawing readers' attention to commonalities and differences within the Malay tribal world, the many case studies resist easy summarization. It is clear that tribal people everywhere face pressure from the effects of globalization. It is also clear that such pressures have long been in existence. Ethnic and cultural complexity marks the localities where tribal people live and this has generated layered webs of names, symbols, and meanings. Oral histories contribute to the forging of collective yet separate identities. Complex identities are, in turn, subjected to the prejudice of state representatives and the conviction that tribal people need to be 'modernized'.

The minorities described in the chapters of this book all have unique features and live in particular environments, both of which are subject to change. Although many detailed insights are offered, the question remains what makes these tribal groups part of the Malay world other than being in proximity, or being complementary, to it. <

- Benjamin, Geoffrey and Cynthia Chou (eds), *Tribal Communities in the Malay World. Historical, Cultural and Social Perspectives*, Singapore/Leiden: ISEAS and IIAS (2002), pp. x + 489, ISBN 981-230-167-4

**Professor Vincent Houben** is professor of Southeast Asian History and Society at Humboldt University Berlin. His research interests include the representation of Melayu and its political realization since 1900, and the history of Vietnam as reflected in the archives of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). He is also working on the Southeast Asia volume for the new Fischer World History series, scheduled to appear in 2007.

vincent.houben@rz.hu-berlin.de  
www2.hu-berlin.de/asaf/soag

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