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Reflections on the 'Disappearing Sakai': A Tribal Minority in Southern Thailand

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The minority tribal groups in the border zones of Southern Thailand (the 'Sakai') are often described as 'disappearing' demographically while the inability to 'know' them at first hand by successive interested parties (the colonial explorer, the naturalist, the government official) has been attributed to their ability to disappear into the jungle, seemingly without a trace. This paper discusses the way the 'Sakai' have faded in and out of ethnology and Thai public consciousness, due in part to their own survival imperatives, and in part to the character of Thai state and society.

'They will all run away from you and disappear into the forest'[1]

My title is deliberately ambiguous: the minority tribal groups generally known in Thai as 'Sakai' have long been declared to be 'disappearing' demographically; and at the same time, the inability to 'know' them at first hand, to obtain control over them by successive interested parties (the colonial explorer, the naturalist, the government official) has been attributed to their ability to disappear into the jungle, seemingly without a trace. This article does not attempt to provide a comprehensive ethnography or discussion of the tribal groups in the Southern Thai border zones.[2] Rather, it traces the way the 'Sakai' have faded in and out of ethnology and Thai public consciousness, due in part to their own survival imperatives, and in part to the character of Thai state and society.[3]

It is necessary to clarify the issue of terminology from the outset. 'Sakai' is the term most commonly applied in Thai to the people belonging to several closely allied minority

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[1] Headman, Trang/Pattalung village, in Stewart Wavell, *The naga king's daughter* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 168.

[2] For a general background and summary of many aspects of 'Sakai' ethnography and history see Annette Hamilton, 'Tribal people on the southern Thai border', in *Tribal communities in the Malay world*, ed. Geoffrey Benjamin and Cynthia Chou (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 77–96; and Hamilton 'State's margins, peoples' centre: Space and history in the southern Thai jungles', *Nomadic Peoples*, ns, 5, 2 (2002): 89–107.

[3] I use the term 'Thai' here for simplicity although until the 1930s the term for the country was 'Siam' and the inhabitants were 'Siamese'. How 'Siam' became 'Thailand' is a complex issue. See discussions by Craig J. Reynolds, Sulak Sivaraksa and Chai-anan Samudavanija in *National identity and its defenders*, ed. Reynolds (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2002).

groups in the far southern region.[4] The same term was common in Malaysia in earlier times, although *Orang Asli* (Original People) has largely replaced it there. The term has the implication of 'slave' or 'servant'.[5] In Thai today it is not considered a proper or polite term, and the term *ngo* or *ngo paa* will be applied.[6] This refers to the physical appearance of the people: being dark-skinned with thick woolly hair, they are thought to resemble the rambutan fruit, which is dark red in colour and hairy.[7]

Several other descriptors are also used in different contexts; for example, scholars may use a regional association term or a linguistic identifier (such as Kensiw, Kintaq, Tonga, Mos). These people were all hunter-gatherers until relatively recently, and their habitat was spread across the Thai–Malaysian border. Thus, those located in Southern Thailand are part of a wider group which in Western ethnology has generally been labelled Semang. There is no doubt that these people belong to a single ethnic group with a common basic culture and technology. Their traditional range and habitat was divided when a border between two nations was created. In ethnological writings, Semang is contrasted with Senoi, which refers to other groups who speak similar languages but practice shifting horticulture as well as hunting and gathering. Senoi are found only in Malaysia; that is, there are no tribal groups of the Senoi type anywhere in Southern Thailand. In Malay contexts, Semang and Senoi are grouped together and usually termed 'Aslian' groups. There are now over 130,000 'Aslian' speakers, but only around 2,000 of these belong to Semang groups in northern Malaysia, with a further 300–350 in Southern Thailand.

In Thai contexts, in order to avoid the use of prejudicial terms such as Sakai or *ngo paa*, many ethnologists and linguists increasingly use the term Maniq for these people. Maniq, or a cognate term in related dialects, means 'human being' and is the term these people use for themselves in contrast with *hamiq*, meaning all who are not Maniq, such as Malay and Thai.[8] Thus, even at the level of the name, terms of reference and identity are highly confusing. Several pairs of contrasting terms exist: for the ethnologists whose primary frame of reference was Malaya (Malaysia), the distinction was between Semang (hunter-gatherers) and Senoi (mixed swidden horticulturalists and hunter-gatherers), each with distinctive physical characteristics. For linguists, the distinction is between the various dialect/language groups (five or perhaps six, each with a distinctive name, at least three of which may be found on either side of the Thai–Malaysian border); for Thai administrators and officials as well as local people, the meaningful distinction is between 'Sakai' or *ngo paa* as against *chao baan* (local people, villagers, mostly Thai). In this paper I will use the term 'Sakai' where it is used in sources being cited or quoted, but 'Maniq' in more general contexts.

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[4] However, some Thai also use the term 'Sakai' for other nomadic groups such as the Mlabri, also known as *Phii Thong Luang* (Spirits of the Golden Leaves), a nomadic group of Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer) speakers found in Nan and Phrae provinces in northern Thailand. They also number around 300 people. For the original ethnography see Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, *Die geister der gelbern blätter: Forschungsreisen in Hinterindien* (Munich: F. Bruckman, 1938); in English, *The spirits of the yellow leaves* (London: L. Hale, 1958).

[5] Andrew Turton, in the introduction to his edited volume *Civility and savagery: Social identity in Tai states* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), p. 6, discusses the term *kha* widely used in northern and western parts of Thailand with a similar meaning, as a generic ethnonym for non-Thai with the implication of being a servant or slave; his discussion of the pairing *kha* and *pa* (jungle, wilderness) is especially illuminating and applicable in the context of the 'Sakai' in the South.

[6] Romanization of Thai words is inevitably problematic. Several different systems co-exist. The 'official' system, used for example in transliterating place names, does not represent the vowel sounds or vowel length adequately. I have attempted to be consistent in my transliteration in this article but when referring to or citing sources where a different spelling has been used, I have generally retained that spelling. For example the term *ngo* may also appear transliterated as *ngaw*, *ngor*, *ngo?*.

[7] See the discussion in Thongchai Winichakul, 'The others within: Travel and ethno-spatial differentiation of Siamese subjects 1885–1910', in *Civility and savagery*, ed. Turton, pp. 38–62.

[8] A similar pattern is commonly noted in many hunter-gatherer or tribal societies. Among Aboriginal Australian groups terms are also found which mean 'us human beings' as against everybody else and many of these terms have passed into general usage, for example *koori* for Aboriginal people in New South Wales and *arnangu* in northern South Australia. There is no single opposite term comparable to *hamiq*, however. In some areas *gubba* is used for white men (government man) while in northern Australia *balanda* is used, derived from 'Hollander', a term borrowed from the Makassarese who visited northern Australia annually long prior to the arrival of any white people in Australia.

Thailand's far South

The southern border zone of Thailand is an extraordinarily complex social, cultural and economic environment. Although it occupies only a small area, it contains bewildering variety. Geographically, it includes near-impenetrable highland rainforest jungle, a vast inland sea, kilometres of sea coast, and natural resources including tin, rubber, fish and marine products, as well as highly fertile two-crop rice-land, to name just some of the main features of the traditional South. The inhabitants of this zone include the majority rural folk who are of Malay or mixed Malay–Thai ethnicity, most of whom are Muslims who follow a generally somewhat syncretic form of Southeast Asian Islam. Merchants, traders, shopkeepers and business people, mostly based in the larger towns and cities, are almost all of Chinese origin, their ancestors mostly having arrived from Southern Chinese coastal provinces two or more generations previously. Finally, there are a number of small tribal minority groups: the so-called 'Sakai' in the interior jungles and the Chao Lae or 'sea-gypsies' on the western coast.

Institutions of government throughout the South are largely controlled by a frequently relocated contingent of Central Thai officials. They include many university staff, Buddhist abbots and monks, bureaucrats in charge of health, media and local government, as well as senior police and military officers in charge of the 4th Army Area Command. Until the end of the communist struggle against the Malaysian Communist Party (MCP) in 1989 (when they agreed to give up their weapons after negotiations known as the Hat Yai Accords) this was the most enduring of the various 'Red Zones' in the kingdom.[9] Many of the demobilized communist Chinese settled together in villages on Thai territory, adding yet more diversity to the southern population.[10] Today the region remains a locale of major military mobilization, no longer on account of communists but now as a result of perceived threats from Islamic extremists and terrorists. For Central Thai bureaucrats the South is a hardship posting, and the sense of fear and anxiety which such people tend to experience, especially if they come from Bangkok, is constant and highly stressful.

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[9] A fascinating 'insider' account from the army point of view is presented by General Dato' Kitti Ratanachaya in his book *The communist party of Malaya, Malaysia and Thailand* (Bangkok: Duangkaew, 1996).

[10] In 2002 the majority of the resettled Chinese ex-communists still did not have Thai nationality even though under the Hat Yai Accords they were promised both land and citizenship. Currently there are seven Chinese resettlement villages in Yala and two others in Songkhla and Narathiwat.

Linguistically, the region is also extraordinarily complex. Malay-Muslims speak a dialect more or less identical with that of the people across the border in northern Malaysia which is reasonably close to standard Malay.[11] The Thai state response to the presence of this language has long been a major point of contention. The language is called 'Jawi' by Thais.[12] From the time of the government of Phibun Songhkram it has been forbidden to speak 'Jawi' in government offices or premises; even where an employee does speak the language, it is not permissible to use it. Thus, Malay-speaking people are required to take translators with them every time they have official business since all official transactions must be done in Central Thai (*phasaa klang*).[13] Today, some people of Chinese origin continue to speak Chinese dialects at home or in ritual contexts, but most use Central or Southern Thai in everyday life.[14]

Many Muslim intellectuals and members of the religious elite are also more or less fluent in Arabic, having been educated in Cairo or elsewhere in the Middle East, and in addition may be relatively fluent in English. Thus, they can avoid speaking both Thai and Malay in contexts where this seems beneficial. During the 1990s, the Muslim elite would speak Malay in everyday situations and would avoid speaking Thai in all possible contexts, even if they were able to do so. Quite often they would switch to Arabic or English.

Finally, the Maniq ('Sakai') and Chao Lae ('Sea Gypsies' Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi) speak their own distinct dialects although most are to some degree able to speak and understand Southern Thai and some also speak and understand Malay. Maniq in the resettlement village also understand and speak Central Thai since the government presented them with television sets in the late 1980s.[15] The Chao Lae in Phuket and nearby are familiar with Southern Thai dialect as well as Malay, and some who have moved up and down the Andaman Sea into Burmese waters speak some Burmese.

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[11] Nevertheless, educated Malay-speakers on both sides of the border dispute this and maintain that the Malay they speak is of a purer kind with its sources in the highly conservative Islamic vision preserved both in Patani and in Kelantan; the universal 'standard' Malay used for example in public contexts is consciously resisted. Thai linguists usually refer to the dialect heard in Southern Thailand as '*Melayu thong-thin*' (local Malay).

[12] The complex issues around the use of the term 'Jawi' cannot detain us here. Many Muslim authorities refute the use of the term for the language of Southern Muslims and say it should be reserved for those texts in Malay language written in Arabic script. A recent discussion of 'Melayu' as a concept includes a brief discussion of early seventeenth- and eighteenth-century uses of the terms 'Jawa' and 'Jawi'; see Anthony Reid, 'Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a source of diverse modern identities', in *Contesting Malayness: Malay identity across boundaries*, ed. Timothy P. Barnard (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), pp. 1–24.

[13] Standard Thai and Central Thai can be regarded as the same, although technically Standard Thai refers to a specific 'bureaucratic' style of language, *phasaa ratchakan*, used for official documents and in all legal contexts. This requires vocabulary substitution, and even those in regional areas who are familiar with Central Thai may find it difficult to deal with *phasaa ratchakan* – although the same is true in most language systems, where 'official' languages are notoriously difficult for ordinary people to understand. See Anthony Diller, 'What makes Central Thai a national language', in *National identity and its defenders*, ed. Reynolds, pp. 71–104.

[14] Southern Thai dialect itself, although close to Central Thai in basic structure, is altered phonologically and highly distinctive, spoken in a speech style characterized as 'fast', eliding syllables and ignoring tones in such a way that Central Thai speakers from outside the South have great difficulty in understanding it. This incomprehensibility is often utilized by Southerners who switch in and out of dialect in difficult situations. Diller describes a Southern Thai 'urban hybrid' dialect as increasing in functional significance, a local prestige speech style using Southern Thai tones and Central Thai vocabulary and segmentals, in ibid., pp. 97, 104.

[15] Although in the absence of electricity in their dwellings, the television sets – numbering two, I was told – were quickly appropriated by the headman of the local Thai village and the schoolmaster. Nevertheless, during the early 1990s the Maniq there were familiar with television and watched certain shows whenever possible, particularly *muay Thai* (Thai boxing).

Research in the South has largely focused on one or other of these groups, more or less in isolation from others.[16] The focus on specific groups and their unique characteristics – that is, the typical ethnological project – obscures the question of relations between them, and also fails to interrogate the complex and often contradictory effects of the centralized state on local systems, as well as questions about everydayness and its negotiations. In a place like Southern Thailand, everybody is somebody else's Other but also may be his neighbour, a relationship with inherently ambiguous qualities, which may be expressed differently according to context. An approach to the region calls for historical, anthropological and cultural theory as well as a sensitivity to the vastly different perspectives produced according to the position of different people and groups within this zone. This article focuses on one minority population but attempts to trace some of its local relationships and national significations, as well as the representations of its imminent disappearance over more than 100 years.

Who are the Maniq?

The presence of Maniq groups in northern Malaysia and Southern Thailand has long presented a major ethnological challenge which has been addressed by a number of writers, notably Geoffrey Benjamin from a sociological viewpoint and Peter Bellwood with regard to cultural and biological differentiation.[17] Only a few Maniq groups continue to live independently, most having been resettled in villages in the past three decades.[18] Today, in Malaysia there are some small groups of Batek De' who are continuing to attempt to survive in Taman Negara National Park, although most of the original group of 700 have moved into government settlements. Previously the Batek De' occupied the watershed of the Lebir River in Kelantan, land which was taken over for massive logging and development of oil palm plantations in the 1970s and 1980s.[19] There may be other similar small groups who move in and out of the settlement environment. Among the Maniq in Thailand, those living in Trang-Phattalung and Satun retain a high level of autonomy while the others live in the resettlement village.

The population estimates for the Maniq in Southern Thailand consistently refer to a similar number, namely around 300–350 people, and this same estimate is found over many decades even though Maniq were reported (for example by Ivor Evans in 1927) to be living in some districts where they are no longer to be found today.[20] The people resettled in Baan Thaanto (Thaanto Village), numbering between 30 and 50, are Kensiw speakers with close ties to relatives directly across the border many of whom live in Grik, northern Perak. In Satun there is a very small group (15–20 people) who are under pressure from Thai officials to leave their normal range; their children are being 'encouraged' to go to Thai schools. Further to the north are the people of Phattalung-Trang, around 200, divided into subgroups which move along the upland mountain chain in the vast Palian forest, part of the Baan Chao Phra Conservation area. They are undoubtedly descendants of the groups visited by Evans in the early to mid-1920s. Today they still live mostly in the jungle, but periodically visit certain Thai villages where they have long-standing relations with locals, exchanging labour for foodstuffs, cloth and metal tools. Maniq maintain the use of their traditional toolkit, including blowpipe and poison-tipped arrows, to hunt and gather, and trade in forest products, especially medicinal herbs and plants, for which there is a strong demand from lowlanders. As I will show shortly, this kind of adaptation seems to have been of very long standing.

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[16] Although those working on Malay-speaking Muslims generally focus also on their relations with the Thai state, or sometimes more directly on the relations between Muslims and Buddhists.

[17] Geoffrey Benjamin, 'Between isthmus and islands: Reflections on Malayan palaeo-sociology', Department of Sociology Working Paper 71 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 1986); Peter Bellwood, 'Cultural and biological differentiation in peninsular Malaysia: The last 10,000 years', *Asian Perspectives*, 32 (1993): 37–60. Archaeological studies are being re-examined with a renewed interest in the biological evolution of the people of the region. See, for example, David Bulbeck, 'Holocene biological evolution of the Malay peninsular aborigines (Orang Asli)', *Perspectives in Human Biology*, 2 (1996): 37–61.

[18] Robert K. Dentan, Kirk Endicott, Alberto G. Gomes and M. B. Hooker, *Malaysia and the original people* (Boston, London: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), p. xii.

[19] Ibid., pp. 24–8.

[20] Ivor H. Evans, *Papers on the ethnology and archaeology of the Malay Peninsula* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927). His informants indicated that 'Negritos' were then also found in Yong Setar district (now Alor Setar in Kedah), in the Patani States, and in Muang Krabi in Siam.

Satun and Trang-Phattalung seem on current maps to be far separated from each other. However, a topographic map shows that the spine of the mountain range stretches between them, suggesting that the present separation of the Satun group from the Trang-Phattalung group is an artefact of current land-use and transportation patterns, and that the groups were originally contiguous and possibly part of a single group. A recent report states that the father of a woman from one of the Trang/Phattalung groups came from Satun.[21] This suggests a traditional occupation zone from north-western Malaysia across the border into Satun and thence to Phattalung-Trang, connecting these groups to the now-extinct 'Negritos' in Perlis. The Baan Thaanto people, on the other hand, are linked with the Kensiw and Kintaq-speakers of Kedah and Perak. Finally, at least one Maniq group, probably Jahai speakers, lives on the border between Malaysia and Narathiwat province.

In earlier times Maniq and their fellows were termed 'Negritos' due to their small stature, very dark skin and woolly hair. It was at one time assumed that they were essentially identical to the 'Negritos' of the Andaman Islands and the Philippines, based on physical anthropology, cultural form and mode of adaptation – largely hunting and gathering and trading in forest products. The Southern Thai and northern Malaysian Negritos speak closely related dialects (to be discussed further below) but there appear to be no linguistic connections between these groups and others in the Andamans and the Philippines. Joseph Birdsell argued that there were 'Negrito' populations in Tasmania and in some remote areas of Queensland and that they represented the original 'wave' of migration to Australia.[22] Questions about origins and 'wave' theories of migration were, by the mid-twentieth century, mostly laid aside, but have re-emerged recently due to vastly improved data sources, especially genetic studies with some dramatic implications.

The ethnology of the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula has long been contentious. In spite of early exploration and numerous accounts in English, French and

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[21] Vipasai Niyamabha, 'Trang's nomadic path', *The Nation*, 20 Sept. 2001, Travel.

[22] Joseph Birdsell, 'The racial origin of the extinct Tasmanians', *Records of the Queen Victoria Museum*, 2 (1949): 105–22; Birdsell, 'Preliminary data on the trihybrid origin of the Australian Aborigines', *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania*, 2, 2 (1967): 100–55.

German from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and excellent recent work by anthropologists, a complete picture of the history and distribution of these populations is far from settled.[23] From both Thai and Malaysian perspectives, the presence of a wholly unrelated population within their national boundaries seems ideologically and symbolically difficult to deal with, even for scholars. I have heard a Malay ethnologist argue that the existing Orang Asli are just ordinary Malay peoples who became isolated from the rest of the population due to their jungle habitation, where they abandoned farming and developed their particular physical and cultural traits. Some Thai accounts insist that the 'Sakai' migrated from elsewhere in relatively recent times. While this is highly unlikely on physical anthropological and linguistic grounds, there have been several alternative scenarios suggested for Senoi/Semang habitation.

Whether or not these Aslian people are direct descendants of the prehistoric inhabitants of the region is a primary question. This period is known from extensive archaeological investigations including osteological studies and is termed 'Hoabinhian'. It is dated between approximately 10,000 and 4,000 BCE on the Peninsula, based largely on carbon dating of a number of rock shelter sites and some assumptions based on stratigraphic excavations.[24] The archaeological record suggests this population was largely displaced by people using simple pottery and a more varied and elaborate toolkit, in at least one case as recently as 1,400 years ago.[25] While it might seem logical to suppose that the Hoabinhians were ancestors to the contemporary hunter-gatherers, many believe otherwise. Some say that the Senoi were descended from Mongoloid horticulturalists from south-Central Thailand more recently than 4,000 BCE; others that coastal Hoabinhians moved into the interior lowlands, later becoming the Semang; one has suggested that the ancestral populations of both Semang and Senoi lived on the coast, but Senoi ancestors moved first into the hinterland more recently than 10,000 BCE while Semang moved later into lowland rainforests and the rugged interior after further population pressure.[26]

While it is true that language is not a necessary marker of ethnicity (peoples having switched languages frequently in the ethnographic record) it is notable that all the Aslian languages are of the Austroasiatic (AA) phylum and Mon–Khmer subphylum and are quite distinct from the Austronesian languages of the Malay majority, and from the Tai–Kadai phylum. The Chao Lae, known as Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi, are

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[23] See, for example, Geoffrey Benjamin, 'Austroasiatic subgroupings and prehistory in the Malay Peninsula', in *Austroasiatic Studies*, ed. Philip N. Jenner, Laurence C. Thompson and Stanley Sarosta (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976), pp. 37–128; Benjamin 'In the long term: Three themes in Malayan cultural ecology', in *Cultural values and human ecology in Southeast Asia*, ed. Karl L. Hutterer, A. Terry Rambo and George Lovelace (Ann Arbor: Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1985), pp. 219–78; Robert K. Dentan, *The Semai: A nonviolent people of Malaya* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1979); Kirk Endicott, *Batek Negrito religion: The world-view and rituals of a hunting and gathering people of peninsular Malaysia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); and Alberto G. Gomes, 'Demography and environmental adaptation: A comparative study of two aboriginal populations in West Malaysia', in *Population change in Southeast Asia*, ed. Wilfredo F. Arce and Gabriel C. Alverez (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1983), pp. 391–431.

[24] The classic studies include Karl G. Heider, 'New archaeological discoveries in Kanchanaburi', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 45, 1 (1960): 63–7 and Heider 'A pebble tool complex in Thailand', *Asian Perspectives*, 11, 2 (1958): 63–7.

[25] *Archaeological excavations in Thailand*, ed. Per Sorensen (London: Curzon Press, 1988), p. 23.

[26] Bulbeck, 'Holocene biological evolution'.

Austronesian speakers, although Urak Lawoi' is a Malay dialect while Moken and Moklen are much more distantly related to Malay. According to one hypothesis, Austroasiatic languages were originally spoken all over Southeast Asia, but were widely displaced first by immigrating Austronesians and later by Tai-speakers. In this view, Maniq and other Aslian peoples are descendants of a distinct original population, part of an early level of human habitation in Southeast Asia largely swamped by the Austronesian migrations and then the immigration of rice cultivators from the north. Thus, 'Negrito' and/or Mongoloid peoples speaking Aslian dialects may have occupied much of Southeast Asia exclusively until perhaps 4,000–5,000 years ago. John H. Brandt, writing on the 'Aslian' people of Southern Thailand, was a proponent of this view:

> [In this region] dwell small bands of primitive nomadic pygmoid negroes representing without doubt the last surviving groups of the indigenous population of this area. That they once enjoyed a far greater and wider distribution seems well recorded in early writings .... The Chinese Pilgrim, I-Tsing, when returning to China from India, recorded the people of Pulo Condore as negritos and stated that many negrito slaves existed in South China at the end of the VIIth Century A.D. Ancient Chinese chronicles also record the people of Fu-Nam (Cambodia) as negritos .... Dr Jean Brengues claims about 20% of the Chong of ... Trat and Chantaburi Provinces, on the Cambodian border, show curly negritoid type hair.[27]

Benjamin, in an extensive consideration of the question of Aslian origins and relations based on linguistic analysis, suggested that the Semang, Senoi and 'tribal Malays' had a relatively recent common ancestor, possibly arising from a common cultural matrix between 5,000 and 6,600 years ago.[28] Alan Fix's summary of various physical traits, including such sparse genetic data as was available at that time (especially for the Semang), suggests that biological differentiation among Orang Asli groups is not great enough to warrant an assumption of separate geographic origins.[29] Much has been made of physical appearance and the corresponding osteological data, which is comparatively easily recovered. Did an original population disappear altogether, to be replaced by in-migrating Negritos and Austronesians at around the same time? Or are the living Maniq descendants of those original people, whose ancestors were pressed into the remotest regions as the pressures of in-migrating Austronesians and then proto-Tai were brought to bear on them following early coastal settlement? And in any case when, and how, did the original population arrive in the Peninsula?

Until very recently the only data on which ethnologists could rely was linguistic, archaeological and cultural. Further advances in the field required different techniques.

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[27] John H. Brandt, 'The Negritos of peninsular Thailand', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 49, 2 (1961): 123–60; See also Iskander Carey, *Orang Asli: The aboriginal tribes of peninsular Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[28] Benjamin, 'Austroasiatic sub-groupings and prehistory'; and 'Between isthmus and islands'. Only some of the populations who follow the 'Malayic' social patterns speak Aslian languages; others speak Malay dialects. The degree of micro-variation in language and social organization is extremely high in this region.

[29] Alan Fix, 'Malayan paleosociology: Implications for patterns of genetic variation among the Orang Asli', *American Anthropologist*, 97, 2 (1995): 313–23.

The emergence of genetic studies, in particular the use of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), has revolutionized the analysis of human origins and occupations. At least one DNA study suggested the likelihood of a direct connection between living Orang Asli/Semang and skeletal material obtained from the Hoabinhian levels of the Gua Cha archaeological site in Kelantan.[30] More recently a series of mtDNA studies have suggested that the earliest modern human habitation 'out of Africa' took place by following coastal routes across present-day India and down through the Malay Peninsula and thence to Australia, most probably between 55,000 and 85,000 years ago. Modern humans did not occupy Europe until around 30,000–40,000 years ago. Since Australia has been proven to be occupied by at least 50,000 years BCE, it is proposed that essentially the same founder population occupied coastal Southeast Asia along a western coastal route.[31]

Two recent studies suggest that both Andaman Islanders and Orang Asli share a common founder mtDNA link.[32] A subtype of this link is found in Australia (Mz). The M31 and M32 types are found in the Andamans and M21 and M22 types among the Aslians. These distinctive subtypes would have emerged after the separation of the original founder population, the original branch M having arisen in a founder ancestor around 65,000 years ago. Researchers working on the Aslian groups included Semang, Senoi and indigenous Malay in their sample.[33] They note that there is a well-documented archaeological record of continuous occupation by hunter-gatherers for at least 40,000 years and conclude that the distinctive mtDNA present in Aslians (i.e., M21 and M22), is virtually unique and likely to be directly descended from the first human settlement of the region perhaps 50,000–60,000 years ago.[34] It is likely that such populations were always small, with limited founder numbers, and would not have greatly increased over the thousands of years of occupation, for complex demographic reasons. It has been demonstrated that population dynamics differ between existing hunting and gathering Negrito groups and sedentary Senoi groups, reflecting the nature of their environmental adaptations.[35] Hence, as in-migrating groups began to exert pressure on the environment and resources of the original inhabitants, their disappearance into more remote and inhospitable regions was inevitable.

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[30] Research was carried out by Professor Takafumi Ishida, who presented a discussion setting out his findings at a conference in Pattani in 2002. His work suggested that there was strong evidence for a direct link. Unfortunately this work has not been published in Japanese or in English (personal communication August 2004 from Professor Shuichi Nagata, who organized the panel on 'Sakai' at the conference). The Gua Cha skeletal materials could very usefully be subjected to more extensive mtDNA study in the light of the recent findings.

[31] Recent mtDNA study of the Lake Mungo 3 skeleton in southern Australia yielded a date of 62,000 +/- 6,000 years ago, making it the oldest human remains in Australia. See Alan Thorne *et al.*, 'Australia's oldest human remains: Age of the Lake Mungo 3 skeleton', *Journal of Human Evolution*, 36 (1999): 591–612.

[32] Sea levels at this time (and later) were considerably lower; thus land which is now separated was then connected. However, the Andaman Islands were not apparently fully connected to the mainland even at lowest sea levels, and there was always at least one significant stretch of ocean between Southeast Asia and Australia which the earliest human settlers must have crossed, implying either a sea-going capacity or accidental events.

[33] This would account for the inclusion of several non-M haplotypes in their sample, such as N21, R21 and B4a. The results do not differentiate between the component groups, which means that assuming Senoi and aboriginal Malay had ancestral components different to those of the Semang, these would not be demonstrable in the results.

[34] Kumarasamy Thangaraj *et al.*, 'Reconstructing the origin of Andaman Islanders', *Science*, 308 (2005): 996; Vincent Macaulay *et al.*, 'Single, rapid coastal settlement of Asia revealed by analysis of complete mitochondrial genomes', in the same issue, p. 1034; a synthesis of the implications is provided by Peter Forster and Shuichi Matsamura, 'Did early humans go north or south', pp. 965–6. The rapid coastal settlement hypothesis, however, is not accepted by all.

Nevertheless, it seems that the Semang remained in significant enough numbers in the border regions, in spite of evident population pressures, until very recent times. If they have 'disappeared' from the Peninsula, this is largely because pressure on their populations has intensified greatly over the past two centuries. It seems that many 'Semang' were in various ways well integrated into pre-modern life prior to that time. One source for this view is a book that is considered by some to be an imaginary history or perhaps a simple forgery. However, there is sufficient historical accuracy to suggest that the author must have had a considerable degree of familiarity with the region or was basing his story on reasonably accurate accounts by others, as they were understood at the beginning of the twentieth century. *The adventures of John Smith in Malaya: 1600–1605* describes campaigns conducted by the queen of Patani against the Malays of Perak using Negrito bowmen as the primary element of her military corps.[36] In this account the Semang were closely associated with the court of this queen.

> Four of the little savages were sent as a bodyguard for John Smith, and also to act as hunters and guides for the expedition. These Semangs were looked up to by the Patani people as the original owners of the land, and were always consulted by the Queen in matters of State . . . and long years before, when Siamese and Malays had colonized the rivers and spread, the first from the North and the others from the South, all over the Peninsula, they had recognised the rights of the savages whom they had found on the land, and had conciliated instead of coercing them. They had inter-married with them also, until the typical inhabitant of Patani was one-third Malay, one-third Semang, and one-third Siamese; and it was only by searching deep in the forest that the pure Semang could now be found.[37]

Whether or not this account can be relied on, other accounts confirm that the Sakai/Semang were in a dependency or serf-like relationship to local rajas, chiefs and lords. Rulers of various kinds established alliances with local tribesmen, some of whom were kept at court; the lord or raja granted protection to the tribes in their normal forest habitat, calling on them for labour or defence.[38]

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[35] Gomes, 'Demography and environmental adaptation'.

[36] There are some interesting issues with regard to the use of both bow and arrow, and blowpipe. Paul Schebesta states that the bow was previously used but had become obsolete among Kensiw and Kenta (Kintaq) and that the elaborate decoration on bamboo items was introduced to the central 'Negritos' at the same time as the blowpipe. Evans states that the Negritos he studied in the Trang-Pattalung region did not use the bow. They recognized it but stated it was Siamese, calling it *chendu*. Further, he states that the blowpipe is not an original Negrito weapon, although known to and used by almost all of the Peninsular groups. It is not clear on what he bases this proposition, which seems highly unlikely given the long-attested use of the blowpipe in the region. Paul Schebesta, *Among the forest dwarfs of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press 1928, reprinted 1973), p. 256; Evans, *Papers on the ethnology*, pp. 3, 5. With regard to blowpipes, the best material for making them is limited to territory in current Malaysia associated with the Temiar people. A lively trade in blowpipes appears to have existed in the past; see R. O. D. Noone, 'Notes on the trade in blowpipes and blowpipe bamboo in north Malaya', *Federation Museums Journal*, 1–2 (1954–5): 1–18.

[37] A. Hale, *The adventures of John Smith in Malaya 1600–1605* (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1909), pp. 195, 204–5.

[38] Anonymous, 'The Semang and Sakai tribes of the district of Kedah and Perak bordering Province Wellesley', *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1 (1878): 111–13.

While accounts of service to rajas were glorified in fictional tales in the early twentieth century, by the nineteenth century the more remotely located Semang had become a major source of slave labour, largely as a result of the kidnapping of children and young women. Slavery was officially abolished in Perak in 1880 but was continued in some states up until 1915. Nelson Annandale and C. H. Robinson commented in 1903 that 'prior to the English occupation of Perak, the Malays used to hunt the Sakais like wild beasts and endeavour to capture and enslave them'.[39] Further north, Annandale described the 'Hami Negritos' of Phattalung as 'a subject race of the Malays and Siamese' and stated that Negrito slaves were in 1878 in the keep of the Raja Muda of Singgora (Songkhla).[40] Paul Schebesta recounts a story from an old Semang man describing Siamese descending from the northeast, 'driving the Semang like wild game before them and carrying off their children'.[41]

Even where people were not directly enslaved, virtually all bands or groups seem to have owed service to a *tuan* or master. This may reflect the earlier pattern of dependency, but John D. Leary suggests that it was a necessity in order to avoid capture and enslavement by others.[42] They worked during harvest in the fields and gathered produce in the jungle, receiving goods such as rice, knives and cloth in return. Annandale provides detailed descriptions of various groups with different dialect names and customary territories, along with information about their relations with local Malay or Siamese rulers.[43] Thus, it is clear that the indigenous people had long-standing relations with those who were without doubt displacing them from their traditional territories, both in Malaya and in what is now southern Thailand. Yet, most contemporary Malaysian and Thai writings present the Maniq/Orang Asli as no more than a low form of humanity stranded in obscure locations, eternally on the brink of disappearance, without any legitimacy in the contemporary world.

There is a widespread view in Thailand that the Maniq originated elsewhere. I was told for instance by *Acharn* Suphart, an anthropologist at Taksin University, that the Sakai are 'Melanesians' who immigrated relatively recently from New Guinea. As has been mentioned, some Western scholars also seem to believe that Aslian peoples may have been relatively recent immigrants (*c.* 5000 BCE) and so it is not surprising to find such a view readily accepted by Thai and Malaysian scholars.

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[39] Nelson Annandale and C. H. Robinson, Fasciculi malayensis*: Anthropological and zoological results of an expedition into Perak and Siamese Malay states, 1901–1902*, parts 1 and 2 (Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1903), p. 180; Kirk Endicott, 'The effects of slave raiding on the Aborigines of the Malay Peninsula', in *Slavery, bondage and dependency in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid and J. Brewster (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), pp. 216–45. Because 'Sakai' were animists and not Muslims, they had no legal rights; John D. Leary, *Violence and the dream people: The Orang Asli in the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960* (Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1995), p. 22.

[40] Cited in Brandt, 'Negritos of Peninsular Thailand', pp. 123–60. He is referring to Nelson Annandale's paper 'Some preliminary results of an expedition to the Malay Peninsula', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 32 (1902): 407–17. Annandale's use of the term 'Hami' ['Hami'] is odd, since this word normally is used by Maniq to refer to non-Maniq. See Nathan Porath, 'Developing indigenous communities into Sakais: South Thailand and Riau', in *Tribal communities in the Malay world*, ed. Benjamin and Chou, p. 100.

[41] Schebesta, *Forest dwarfs*, p. 148.

[42] Leary, *Violence and the dream people*, pp. 20, 21–4; see also Geoffrey Benjamin, 'On being tribal in the Malay world', in *Tribal communities in the Malay world*, ed. Benjamin and Chou, pp. 48–50.

[43] Annandale and Robinson, Fasciculi malayensis, pp. 180–3.

> Some people believe that the Sakais migrated to the south of Thailand and the Malay Peninsula from the Sahara desert about 4,000 years ago . . . and there are others who believe that the Sakais [here = Senoi] came to live in the Malay Peninsula after the Semang did, and they may be the same band of the Vedda of the Langka island who migrated to live there a very long time ago.[44]

The idea that the 'Negritos' came originally from Langka (Sri Lanka) appears to have originated from a misunderstood report by Evans from a Patthalung-Trang Negrito woman.[45] Even a sympathetic observer such as Phaiboon Duangchand, who accepts the priority of 'Sakai' habitation in the Peninsula, nonetheless speaks of them as being far down an evolutionary scale, reflecting common British colonialist views of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

> These people lag behind very much in their civilization and culture. They inhabit the deep forest and have just learnt a bit about planning . . . . I would like to define the word 'Sakais' as the 'Primitive men' because they have been inhabiting in the Malay peninsula longer than all other tribes. However they have a lower civilization and culture than other tribes because they adjust themselves very slowly to new environments.[46]

Moreover, as we shall see below, markers of physical type such as skin colour, hair form, stature and so on, which are accepted in archaeological and anthropological studies as at least 'proxy' markers of genetic connection ('race') do not have the same weight or significance in Thailand, where cultural markers are far more important in determining a person's identity, which in turn defines the types of rights and recognitions which thereby arise.

'They will disappear into the jungle . . .'

Given the history of displacement, violence and enslavement, it is hardly surprising that the Maniq are widely known for their ability to disappear. Many early explorers and ethnologists noted their frustration in attempting to spend time with Maniq bands. Such researchers set out on expeditions into the interior of the Malay Peninsula on ethnological or geographical expeditions and would come across small groups of Maniq. They would attempt to question these people (usually through two or three levels of interpreters) and would then try to arrange a more in-depth visit in subsequent days. Schebesta

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44 Phaiboon Duangchand, 'A phonological description of the Kansiw language (a Sakai dialect)' (M.A. thesis, Mahidol University, Bangkok, 1984), p. 2. Phaiboon cites two sources published in Thai, and I have not as yet been able to identify them.

45 I. H. N. Evans, 'An ethnological expedition to south Siam', *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums*, 12 (1925): 34–58. Evans made similar remarks in *Papers on the Ethnology*, p. 13, where he remarks that the association is made between the monkey followers of Rama who rescued Sita, his wife, from the demon king of Ceylon, and the 'aboriginal tribes' of India. He suggests that the Ramayana story may have been adopted by the Negritos. He certainly is not suggesting that the Negritos' ancestors came from Sri Lanka. The term 'Langka' here probably refers to the old (Mon?) kingdom of Langkasuka which is claimed by some to have been the precursor to present-day Patani; Ahmkad Idris, 'Tradition and cultural background of the Patani region', in *Regions and national integration in Thailand*, ed. Volker Grabowsky (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1995), p. 195.

46 Phaiboon, 'A phonological description', p. 2.

gives a typical account following a visit to the Thai province of Phattalung in 1924.[47] He unexpectedly encountered a group of six people on their way to the provincial capital to buy rice. Two men, two women and two youths constituted the party. He describes them in familiar physical terms.[48] After buying a blowpipe which one of the men was carrying, and trying to obtain various items of information, he 'made an arrangement with them to accompany me on the following morning to their quarters, which they readily promised to do . . . . During the night the tribe departed, being impelled, so I was informed, by fear; and I did not succeed in finding their quarters, though I searched for them next day along the way towards Trang.'[49]

Time and again, early explorers reported that the Maniq, although ostensibly co-operative, lost no time in disappearing into the jungle, where nobody including local Siamese could follow them, due to their distrust of outsiders and to the nature of the terrain they occupy. In order to understand this further, it is important to realize the absolutely alien qualities which the jungle environment possesses from the viewpoint of the Siamese then and the Thai today, whether we are speaking of Bangkok-based authorities, local officials or ordinary people living adjacent to these districts. From the Thai viewpoint, the forest is an environment of extreme discomfort, psychological as much as physical. While the upland rainforest world is cool and comfortable by contrast to the baking muddy ricefields, for Thais it is full of threatening dangers. The jungle is unknowable to the outsider, in part because they cannot read its signs. Thus, it appears 'trackless', a place where nobody can know where to go, as against the relatively ordered footpaths and roadways joining Thai habitation sites, often adjacent to rivers or canals by which movement between places is easy and well understood. Although pathways connect all significant parts of the rainforest jungles, they are hardly 'marked' to an outsider and are unsuitable for anything but bare feet. Huge tree roots provide niches for steep upward climbing, paths wind between and alongside boulders and through steep stony rises, routes cross streams and rivers depending on the river height, and many similar clues allow Maniq to move comfortably between places. Above all, this knowledge is passed on by childhood experience. Those who have walked the forests and mountains since childhood 'know' their habitation spaces without having to reflect on that knowledge, nor is there any need for 'signs' which would allow interpretation or a site for the orientation of strangers.

Apart from the lack of familiarity, and the apparent impossibility of an outsider's obtaining it, there are other dangers in the jungle. These include the presence of large animals such as tigers, as well as various pythons and poisonous snakes, but equally frightening is the likely presence of spirits or ghosts, which are thought by Thai to be especially prolific in 'empty' spaces where the customary forms of human habitation do not exist. This is because human manipulation – the creation of ricefields and planting of trees especially, together with built structures such as shrines and spirit houses – has the effect of 'taming' wild places and making the co-existence of humans and the spirit world possible. Thus, when Thai people begin to occupy new and previously unoccupied spaces they will build a spirit-house or make offerings to particularly large trees (which will be spared the axe) in order to pacify the spirits of the place.

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[47] Schebesta uses the spelling 'Pattalung' throughout. I have corrected it here for the sake of consistency with the occurrence of this place name elsewhere in the text.

[48] 'The colour of their skin was very dark. The nose was distinctly negroid, the eyes level, the expression of the face very childlike.' (Schebesta, *Forest dwarfs*, p. 24).

[49] Ibid.

In deep jungles, clearing, planting and cultivation are not possible, thus producing the niche environments which are the only ones available to Maniq today. One hundred years ago, of course, the amount of uncleared land adjacent to the upland jungle was much greater, and clearly Maniq and others were able to utilize this living zone. Thus, when early explorers and adventurers wanted to 'find' or 'follow' local bands, their Siamese guides (without whom of course they could not go anywhere, not least because they needed a large number of carriers to transport their equipment) were simply unable to follow them.

When the French mining engineer and amateur ethnologist Jacques de Morgan undertook his exploratory voyage in the kingdoms of Perak and Patani in 1884 with the intention of studying the 'savage populations' who lived in the mountains, he took with him a troop of varying numbers which included local indigenous soldiers together with Malays from Sumatra, fully armed in order to resist any attack, as well as elephants and 'Sakai' porters to carry all of the necessary food and ammunition for the party.[50] A black and white plate in the book shows the intrepid explorer kitted out in a white tropical outfit and pith helmet, being carried in a specially designed cane chair placed on carrying rails, with eight porters managing this ingenious method of travel, one carrying a large umbrella over his head. Penetrating deeper into the forest the Malay guards and local soldiers became useless, and his party became reliant on 'Sakais'. 'The route was very difficult, and only the Sakais knew how to move readily in these labyrinths of branches, fallen trees and bamboos which pulled at clothes and skin.'[51]

High in a mountain range near the headwaters of the Perak River, de Morgan was told by one of his guides that in those areas the 'Sakais' could not live due to the cold, but other men 'of short stature, dressed solely in leaves around their middle' inhabited the whole region. According to one informant, they were not men at all but 'fire-making monkeys'. They had crinkly hair and spoke a language no-one could comprehend – living in caverns, eating only wild plants and completely unfamiliar with the use of metals, using only stone implements.[52] The entire mountainous region between Perak, Selangor and Kelantan was said to be occupied by these people 'who disappear at the approach of men'.[53] At that time their existence of was according to de Morgan completely unknown to the Europeans and Malays, and virtually unknown to the 'Sakai' [Senoi?] of the lowland regions. That night, Saturday 26 July, they saw two or three lights on a distant hillside – camps of these mysterious people, but de Morgan was obliged to return to his base camp. Determined to try to enter this difficult country from another approach, de Morgan assembled a new party at Ipoh, purchasing presents to encourage the local 'Sakais' to penetrate deep into the jungle. However, although they were pleased to accept the presents, they promptly 'disappeared'. Thus, it seems de Morgan did not actually penetrate into this mysterious region, which would appear to be the area between Grik in northern Malaysia and Betong in Thailand, which is indeed the home of some of the present-day Maniq. Were the 'monkeys with fire' the southernmost Maniq? Who were the people he travelled with at the end of his incomplete journey?[54]

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[50] Jacques de Morgan, *Exploration dans la Presqu'île Malaise, royaumes de Pérak et de Patani* (reproduction of the 1st edition, 1886; Pattani: Prince of Songkla University and Paris: Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique, 1993, my translation). De Morgan refers throughout to 'Sakais', although the people he employed were perhaps Senoi, or Semang, who had moved to live in closer association with coastal and valley Malays.

[51] Ibid., p. 34.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., p. 39.

If the Maniq were hardly known in Malaya and England at that time, they certainly made a dramatic appearance in Siam not long afterwards. The 'Sakai' of Thailand have re-appeared in Thai public culture at various intervals ever since. Sometime prior to 1905, a Maniq child named Kanang from Phattalung was obtained and sent to the Royal Palace of King Chulalongkorn in Bangkok. Schebesta's account suggests that the King himself visited Phattalung and there came into 'contact' with the child. Perhaps he had been already kidnapped or was in service to a local dignitary. In the official account the child was presented to the King by *Chaophraya* Yommarat (Pan Sukhum), who was the governor of Phattalung. In any case, Kanang was removed from his home region and became a page in the King's court. Although, from the king's own photograph, he looks to be aged between eight and nine, he is credited with providing detailed ethnological information to the king, who wrote a brief description of the '*Ngo Paa*' based on the experience.[55]

Chulalongkorn subsequently wrote a romantic drama, also called *Ngo Paa*. Purporting to describe romantic conflicts among the jungle people, the story concerns the hero, Sompla, who is killed by his enemy Hanao during a fight for the hand of the beautiful Lamhab. Hanao had gained consent from the family to marry the girl, but she did not love him. After her lover's death, she committed suicide. Thongchai Winichakul writes of this work that the identity of the 'Senoi' (such as 'Sakai'/Maniq) is irrelevant and that they could be replaced by any people, although I would argue that their identity as the most 'Other' to the Thai is particularly significant.[56] Written in the form of a long structured poem, it is now compulsory reading for high school students, largely because of its literary beauty but especially because of the reverence universally expressed towards its author, Chulalongkorn, today worshipped as 'the Great Moderniser'.[57] In one genre or another, the story has been circulated in Thailand under elite patronage, and is often described as the Thai equivalent of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

During 1997, at the peak of the Thai 'boom' years, the story was re-presented in Bangkok by the Thai Khadi Research Institute and the Fine Arts Department. It became part of a major research project aimed at tracing information and documents on the history of the work. The story has been adapted for many forms of performance over many years, including performances at the Petchaboon Palace during the reign of King Rama VI, and later during the reign of Rama VII. A massive documentation effort has been sustained, including recording of all 141 songs in the musical version, and video recording of traditional dances used in the work. A special modern performance was arranged on 3–5 May 1997 at the Patravadi Theatre, which included film versions, modern dance versions and traditional theatre. In addition, a national seminar was held at the Siam City Hotel on 3–4 May 1997, which would 'help participants, mostly high school literature teachers, gain a better understanding of Ngawpa [*Ngo Paa*]'. This project was supported by a 100,000 baht budget from the government and additional funds from private agencies. A comment from Sumitr Pitiphat, who was associated with the project, proclaimed that 'This project not only dwells on conservati[on] matters like collecting old documents, but it's also innovative as it incorporates modern media like film and contemporary theatre.'[58] Again, in 2001, Chulalongkorn's musical drama resurfaced as an animated television series, subsequently appearing in the form of a cartoon book, the launch of which was marked with a nationwide student painting competition to win royal trophies and scholarships.[59] Through these repeated re-appearances in popular cultural forms, under the imprimatur of national elites, the Maniq are brought into view as a living people although they are constantly described as in the process of disappearing. The *Bangkok Post* article cited above concurs, describing the 'Sakai tribe' as 'on the brink of extinction'.

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[54] Ibid., pp. 39–40. A close reading of de Morgan's work is extremely interesting for the light it casts on the conditions of the 'Sakai' in the remoter parts of Perak, who seem to have relied as much or more on hunted and gathered food and trading in forest products as on anything they could grow themselves. Rather than distinguishing clearly between Senoi and Semang in this region, this suggests a high level of continuity in cultural form.

[55] Schebesta, *Forest dwarfs*, p. 25.

[56] Thongchai, 'The others within', p. 39.

[57] Irene Stengs, 'Worshipping the great moderniser: The cult of King Chulalongkorn, patron saint of the Thai middle class' (Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 2003).

Maniq in the Emergency

While the Maniq remain in the Thai collective consciousness, embodying nostalgia for a primitive exotic Otherness, the realities of their condition in most of the twentieth century seem to have been completely unrecognized. For decades after the interventions of King Chulalongkorn, the actual lives of the people seem again to have disappeared. Recent work by John D. Leary has brought together the remarkable story of the way twentieth-century political events intersected with the Maniq way of life even in the obscure and remote jungle mountains.[60] Following the Japanese landings along the southern Thai gulf coastlines on 8 December 1942 and their rapid overland penetration of Malaya, British colonial authority disintegrated, culminating in the fall of Singapore. During this phase, many Chinese accused of being 'communists' were released from prison and were armed by the departing British and instructed to oppose the Japanese. Defeated in the lowlands, the cadres removed themselves into the interior, into the remote jungle spaces then occupied without contest by the Maniq on both sides of the border.

In these spaces, nominally part of the Thai kingdom and the Malayan colony (later the Malaysian state), but effectively in a condition of anarchy, the tribal people were obliged to forge completely new relations with a very unexpected kind of arrival. Peripatetic Chinese had already established mining, rubber-tapping, and trading locations in some parts of the jungle, and in the post-war period the Malayan communists utilized these, and the occasional resources of the nearest small towns, to wage a guerrilla war in the interests of their revolution. This only ended with the Hat Yai Accords of 1989; for over 40 years many Chinese had been living in the jungle on the Thai side of the border, close to Betong and near the heartland of the Kensiw, where a complex and often conflicted symbiosis developed. This is a long and fascinating story which I have been detailing through interviews with elderly Chinese living in the border towns, especially at Betong. The Maniq were involved willy-nilly in the struggles of the combatants. The MCP demanded that they support their cadres by leading them into safe places into the jungle: the Malayan and Thai militias demanded that they reveal the places where guerillas were hiding.

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[58] *Bangkok Post*, 26 Apr. 1997, p. 1, Outlook.

[59] 'Painting Ngo Pah', *Bangkok Post*, 14 Dec. 2001.

[60] Leary, *Violence and the dream people.*

The conflicting demands placed on the Maniq throughout the region were difficult to manage. Many attempted to remove themselves further into the jungle, but as the communists' position deteriorated they too were seeking to use the most remote jungle. Many Maniq formed close relationships with individual Chinese, providing them with jungle products in exchange for rice, iron tools and similar items. As the conflict escalated, however, bombing and strafing began to occur. I was told eyewitness accounts of helicopters flying low over the jungle and strafing Maniq encampments with machine guns. Those living on the southern border around Betong were in the most vulnerable position, but, further to the north in Pattalung-Trang, communists were also in hiding and border patrol police and military expeditions were launched to find them. How many Maniq died during this period is impossible to estimate.

In Malaysia, a policy of progressive relocation and settlement of Orang Asli was put into place. In Thailand, this strategy was not followed until the early 1970s, when the main group of Kensiw speakers whose home range straddled the border were removed to the resettlement village, Baan Thaanto. The people were visited personally by the Queen who gave them an area of rubber land as well as a surname, Srithaanto, by which all Maniq of this area are now officially known. The process of rounding up the Maniq and moving them to the new village was not particularly difficult; keeping them there was, and to the present day they constantly cross the border into Malaysia, and Thai officials are frequently required to go and retrieve them.[61]

One of the effects of settlement seems to have been a great change in the degree to which the Maniq of Baan Thaanto have been integrated into and are visible to the local community. Many people especially in Betong commented that in 'the old days' (1930s–1970s) Maniq could be seen frequently in town, walking along the roads, moving between areas and so on. They often worked temporarily in rubber tapping or clearing land and planting, being paid in rice and cloth. They walked about in various kinds of dress, sometimes their own minimal bark or moss-cloth coverings, sometimes in Thai-style clothing. They were accepted by local people as a normal component of the population, appearing and disappearing as they chose. After the resettlement, they were much less often seen and people commented that they were now 'under control' or 'tamed', and no longer free to move about as they had done before.

In the American Museum of Natural History, in July 1998, I came across a collection of items pertaining to the Sakai. Most interesting was a collection of photographs from the papers of H. L. Shapiro, Curator of Ethnology at the Museum in the 1930s. Although the photographs are undated, Shapiro's papers indicate that he visited the Federated Malay States during a trip to 'the Orient' from September 1931 to March 1932 to carry out studies of 'race mixture and genetics'.[62] There are captions attached from which we can determine much about them. Many show 'Semang' people, including groups of young women on the road from Kroh (Grik) to Betong – the main link sustained across the border among the present-day people – and a number show youths walking around Betong town, with 1930s-style American cars in the background. Clearly Maniq were living in and around Betong, and moving across the border between Betong and Grik at that time. Their presence in town aroused no particular interest and they were presumably confident enough of their safety to allow groups of unaccompanied young women to travel this route.

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[61] A recent report from a local official in Yala indicates that the majority of the Baan Thaanto residents have moved back across the border to Malaysia, where they are receiving cash payments from the Malaysian government (personal communication, March 2005).

Thus, although the Maniq had 'disappeared' from the mainstream record of Thai culture, in the context of the local South they were very much a part of the scene. I also recorded a number of accounts of close supportive relations between Maniq and local Chinese settlers. Lo Lim, a frail widow over 80 years of age, told me that she had left her brutal Chinese husband in Penang and, taking her two young children with her, walked overland until she reached the jungle zone near the border. Desperate to escape from her husband she befriended some Maniq near Grik town, and they led her across jungle paths (away from the official border crossing) to near Betong, where she obtained work as a rubber plantation worker for a wealthy Chinese owner. She remained friends with the Maniq who came and camped near her frequently. Many other local people had tales to tell of the long-standing relations they had had with various Maniq individuals and groups.

Apart from government officials and others whose duties bring them directly in contact with the Maniq, some degree of connection remains with local villagers who live in areas adjacent to their living spaces. In Phattalung province, a large village is located right at the edge of the heavily timbered jungle range which is the easternmost part of the Phattalung-Trang group's range. I was told that about 30 Maniq were living near this village. With the assistance of a local university official and in company with a research student, we travelled many kilometres to reach it. Arriving in the late morning, we were cordially greeted by the *phu yai baan* (village headman) and after a leisurely chat on the platform outside his house, joined by a number of other villagers, we learned that indeed the Maniq had been camping on the lower part of the nearby mountain until just the previous week. Several of them had been working for some of the local rubber producers, in exchange for rice which they had taken back to their relatives in the camp. Most of them had attended a local wedding, and there were coloured snapshots to prove it, brought out in a series of small albums. There were the Maniq, some wearing cheap clothes and one or two naked but for the customary waist-belt and leaf and grass coverings, carrying blowpipes. One of the locals led us down a muddy road to a recently cleared site which was as close as you could get to the forested mountainside, and there, across a stream-bed and about 200 metres uphill, were the customary Maniq rattan and leaf shelters, now abandoned. On enquiring why everyone had left, the locals shrugged and said that was the way of the Maniq: they are here one minute and disappear the next.

However the story was not as simple as that. During their stay near the village, which seemed to have lasted for one or two months, everything had been going well until, almost immediately after the wedding party, a Maniq woman had died. The cause of the sudden death was not known. There was no inquiry and no inquest, of course; after all, she was not a Thai. Nevertheless the local villagers, led by the headman and the abbot of the local Thai temple, insisted that the woman be given a Thai Buddhist funeral, which involved cremation. For Maniq, it is imperative that the body be allowed to decay and that the bones be laid down within the forest, which is its natural home. At night, they took the body from the temple compound and fled, removing their clothes as they passed from the village road across the stream to the mountain side. Indeed discarded clothing was still evident beside the stream-bed, muddy and crumpled.

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[62] This information is found in the archival box at the American Museum of Natural History containing the photographs which includes Shapiro's *curriculum vitae* dated May 1944.

Later in the day, visiting the local school-teacher, I was told the usual stories about the Maniq: that they are a very primitive form of human being, guileless and gentle, who visit local people to work because they like the taste of rice but are too lazy to plant it themselves. As we sat chatting outside his house, a number of passers-by gathered to listen or make some observations. A little later, when we were about to leave his house, another person appeared. This was a young man, dressed in shirt and trousers, wearing sandals and a string of Buddhist amulets around his neck. He had black crinkly hair and very dark skin; he was short; he was, without doubt, a 'Sakai'. After chatting in Phattalung-style Thai for a time, he went on his way. Incredulous, I asked my host where he had come from? 'Right here', was the reply, 'He has always lived here.' 'But surely he is a Sakai?' The teacher laughed uproariously. 'How can he be a Sakai? He speaks Thai and is a Buddhist!'

This episode made it apparent that the markers of 'race' which are so significant in Western understanding, by which certain people and groups are separately identified and subjected to different treatment, are far less significant in the Thai context, and provides another means for understanding where the 'Sakai' disappeared to. Presumably for many generations the option to 'become Thai' has been available, whether as a result of growing up in semi-serfdom or after long periods of absorption into local Thai communities. It is not only a matter of intermarriage or informal sexual transaction, although that certainly also takes place: some of the photographs I saw in the Phattalung village showed one young Maniq woman carrying an obviously part-Thai baby.[63] Once a person ceases using the 'signs' of their group identity, particularly those of speech, dress and religion, they can 'become' Thai. Today, Thai identity is another matter, since citizenship is not available to non-Thai such as hill-tribes and other minorities. Nevertheless, numerous people of Maniq ancestry must have been absorbed in this way in Southern Thailand, and perhaps the traces of their presence can be seen in the crinkly dark hair and dark skin so readily identified as 'Pak Thai' – Southern Thai – by people all over Thailand. Such a proposition, however, is not likely to find ready acceptance: it was recently reported that 'the first mixed heritage child in the Sakai ethnic minority of southern Thailand' is five-year-old Duangjan Inn-thongkaew, whose 'exotic beauty is beyond compare'. She is 'blessed with the right mix of the best traits of her parents'.[64]

In the late 1990s, the 'Sakai' once again began to appear in the national consciousness. With the rapid development across the South during the boom years, and particularly the extension of good quality sealed roads, the stunning scenery through the mountains there became accessible as never before, and tourists from Bangkok and all over Thailand began to visit the region in considerable numbers. A caption in a mainstream Thai-language daily says it all:

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[63] Because the Maniq are so dark in complexion with tightly curled hair, any child of mixed parentage is immediately obvious. In the colour photographs of Maniq I saw in this village, this was the only child of mixed ancestry.

[64] *Bangkok Post*, 23 May 2002, Outlook, p. 2.

> The Ngaw Paa wake up: after emigrating more than 10 years ago from Amphur Sukhirin, Narathiwat Province, a group of native people make up their minds to come down from the mountain to commemorate together the Year of Thai Tourism.[65]

I had read about the existence of Maniq in Narathiwat province in literature of the 1960s but everyone said they had 'disappeared'. Suddenly, here they were in a newspaper photograph in the 1990s, traditionally unclothed and carrying their blowpipes and darts. The Thai conceptualization was revealing. According to the newspaper article, they had 'emigrated'. This referred to the fact that they had left Narathiwat, which meant that they had left Thailand and gone over the border into northern Malaysia. Now they had 'awoken', as if their sojourn in the jungle was a kind of sleep; and coming down from the mountain, ironically, meant they could become objects for the tourist gaze, as indeed their fellows living at Baan Thaanto had long been. The Narathiwat group apparently remained a short time near a village where they had long had ties with a Thai–Malay family, then once again 'disappeared'. This group are more than likely members of the Jahai-speaking group who occupy parts of Narathiwat as well as Perak and northern Kelantan.[66]

In 2001, it appeared likely that one of the last refuges of the forest-dwelling Maniq in the Palian district of Trang would be affected by a tourist venture. According to the report in *The Nation* newspaper, tourist promoters have tried to bring visitors here to see the Sakai, but 'most of the time they are disappointed when the tribes people disappear', said Prateep, a member of the Trang Jungle Tourism Association. 'The tribes people hardly stay for camera snapping'. Nevertheless, he proposed to open an eco-lodge in the Palian jungle to provide for those who enjoyed jungle trekking in a pristine environment. These plans however seem to have been subsequently abandoned due to the uncertain security situation in the region.[67]

Farther south, for the people of Baan Thaanto tourism had become, during the 1990s, a key aspect of their lives. Dressed in a modest version of traditional clothing, they had become frequent 'guests' at shopping malls and similar venues in Hat Yai, where they performed dances and simply stood around being observed by curious tourists and locals. The Year of Thai Tourism was a particularly strong effort by the Tourist Authority of Thailand in the aftermath of the financial crisis, as tourist dollars from external visitors were of far greater value than previously (due to the lowering of the Thai baht against other major currencies) and the search for tourist attractions intensified. In the far South, most tourists went to beaches or sought other water-based sports in the coastal provinces. In the effort to diversify the attractions around Hat Yai, small-scale tourist operators began to bring visitors to Baan Thaanto. These visits included some payment to the local people and considerably more to the tourist operators. Many of the Baan Thaanto people had been living in wooden Thai-style houses (although they also had rattan shelters nearer the forest pathway) but now were obliged to build more of the latter so they could sit in them and be photographed by the visitors.

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[65] *Daily News*, 1 Jan. 1999, p. 1 (in Thai). The caption was accompanied by a coloured photograph of the semi-naked people lined up against a forest background.

[66] My thanks to an anonymous referee of this article who suggested this and made other helpful comments.

[67] *The Nation*, 20 Sept. 2001, Travel.

However, this modest form of living, arising from the intersection between global financial markets, international tourism and the 'appearance' of the 'most primitive men of the jungle' at the edges of a remote part of Thailand, has virtually disappeared in the current crisis of the far South. Islamic extremists and the Thai government, through the Border Patrol Police, local police services and the Fourth Army Regional Command, have been locked in bloody combat, resulting in the storming of the Kru Sii mosque outside Pattani in 2004. As a result, tourism to the South has virtually stopped since security of visitors cannot be guaranteed. As the *Bangkok Post* headline said: 'Tourist Slump Leaves Tribe Short of Cash'.[68] The *Washington Times* followed up the story as part of its coverage of the new terror threat in the South. One 'Sakai', Supaporn Srithaanto, 36, told a journalist that 'tourist coaches are nowhere to be seen'. The journalist, Martin Sieff, reports that the Thai government recently transplanted 'animist tribes' from northern hill areas to take advantage of the booming tourist trade in the South. 'But many of the new arrivals were resented by Muslim-majority, longtime residents', he said. But with tourism collapsing in the South, 'the transplanted Thai jungle-tribes people are suffering disproportionately as a result'. Who are these 'transplanted tribes'? The 'Sakai' of Baan Thaanto, apparently.[69] How ironic that people whose ancestors probably occupied the region alone for thousands of years are now being represented as 'transplants'.[70]

Conclusion

It seems certain that the Aslian peoples occupied the Peninsula for thousands of years, certainly prior to the arrival of the Austronesian ancestors of present-day Malays and the ancestors of the present-day Thai. The first Western explorers noted the presence of these distinctive people, identifiable by their physical characteristics, technology and mode of subsistence, and at the point of contact many were engaged in various ways with the surrounding populations, often in serf or slavery relations, but also in other forms of interdependence. The further the explorers travelled into the interior, the more striking was the level of autonomy of the tribes, who occupied at Western contact vast jungle tracts at lower and higher elevations, the more populous southern groups engaging in small-scale semi-nomadic slash and burn agriculture and the northern groups living from wild foods and trade in forest products.

Many observers has commented on the apparent fragility of the northern (Semang/Maniq) populations and the difficulty they face in attempting to maintain their autonomy and manage their relations with others who have sometimes been directly predatory on the people themselves and certainly upon their lands. The imminent disappearance of these people has been announced time and again. Today, in Southern

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[68] *Bangkok Post*, 14 June 2004, on-line archives.

[69] *Washington Times*, 22 June 2004, on-line edition.

[70] It is hard to know where the idea came from that the Maniq of Baan Thaanto had been transplanted to the South from the North. Perhaps it was journalistic fancy, or poor information from Thai sources who are often as ignorant about the Maniq as are Western journalists. It can definitely be said that the Maniq of Southern Thailand are not transplants from some other zone.

Thailand, the fact that some 300 people survive as a distinct population group, many continuing to resist 'settlement', seems like an extraordinary testament to the viability of their way of life. Nevertheless, as the very last frontiers of the forest fall to the jungle-trekking entrepreneur, in a context where the idea of an inherent value and dignity attaching to forest-dwelling nomads is barely conceivable, the question of survival becomes pressing as never before. This paper has attempted to present evidence for the likelihood that these are the descendants of the earliest modern humans to settle the world 'out of Africa', who survived for thousands and thousands of years until more recent transformations have pressed in on their environment and living adaptations, stranding them in modern nation – states which fail to recognise their significance to human history in the Southeast Asian region and instead declare their inevitable 'disappearance'.