



EXPLORING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE, SOCIOECONOMIC CHALLENGES, AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF JAHAI



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Qayherah Ahmad Zam Zam 

The Jahai, an Orang Asli sub-ethnic group in Malaysia, represent a unique cultural and ecological heritage deeply connected to their forested homeland. This blog explores their traditional practices, including hunting, spiritual beliefs, and music, while addressing the impact of modern challenges like resettlement, tourism, and socio-economic pressures. By celebrating their resilience and cultural identity, the blog highlights the importance of preserving their traditions in a rapidly changing world.

The Jahai people

The Jahai are an Orang Asli sub-ethnic group, classified by colonial researchers as Negrito, due to their physical features (Carey, 1976; Linnaeus et al., 1792; Skeat & Blagden, 1906). Although it is important to critique the concept of race, as it is largely a social construct (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000), in general, the Department of Orang Asli Malaysia (JAKOA) follows the identifications proposed by previous researchers, namely that the appearance of the Jahai people resembles that of Abyssinians/Africans, as well as the Andamanese and Aeta peoples of the Philippines (JHEOA, 2002). They typically have dark skin, fine curly or woolly hair, flat noses, and round eyes. However, this is no longer always the case due to the increasing occurrence of intermarriages between the Jahai people and other ethnic groups.

Jahai communities are primarily located in the rural areas of Perak and Kelantan, Malaysia, and typically settle along riverbanks or near lakes. Some of them continue to live a nomadic lifestyle, often

The Jahai language, which shares its name with the community, belongs to the Northern Aslian subgroup of the Aslian languages. This subgroup is a geographically and genetically distinct branch of the Mon-Khmer language family and is ultimately part of the Austroasiatic language system (Burenhult, 2005). Burenhult (2005) documented a rich vocabulary within the Jahai language that reflects the forest landscape, showcasing the Jahai's profound spatial awareness of the forest as a cosmos that facilitates the harmonious coexistence of plants, animals, humans, and supernatural beings.

Nowadays, many Jahai have agreed to a settled or semi-settled life as the result of a Rancangan Pengumpulan Semula, RPS (literally translated as 'Regroupment Plan') established by the government of Malaysia following the construction of the Temenggor hydroelectric dam in the late 1970s. One notable example is that of Air Banun, in the district of Hulu Perak, Perak state.

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relocating to other areas in response to factors such as health needs, expanding family size, the need to maintain harmony within the group, as well as to acquire new food resources (Masron et al., 2013).

A RPS village has also been established at Sungai Rual, in the district of Jeli, Kelantan state (Burenhult, 2005).

In the RPS Air Banun, facilities such as security posts, schools, hostels, clinics and tar roads were provided in order to improve the quality of life of the indigenous community. A few projects were also planned to improve the socio-economic status of the people. For example, creating rubber plantations, fruit orchards, short-term plantations, animal farms, fisheries, rattan industries and small shops (Nawan, 1993).

Hunting practices (Loke et al., 2019)

Loke et al. (2019) conducted a study that explored the knowledge and hunting practices of the Jahai community in three villages around the Royal Belum State Park, namely Kampung Sungai Tiang, Kampung Sungai Kejar, and Kampung Aman Damai. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the

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The traditional ecological practices of the Jahai are flexible and opportunistic. They are based on hunting, fishing and the collection of wild tubers and vegetables. Occasionally, the Jahai make small swiddens where they grow mainly cassava and dry rice. They are also engaged in the collection of commercial forest products, mainly rattans, gaharu (*Aquillaria* spp.) and honey (Burenhult, 2005).

The remainder of this blog will explore a range of Jahai hunting, knowledge, spiritual and cultural practices, as well as the impact of tourism, and related socioeconomic challenges, drawing on specific scholarly studies. The aim is to provide a well-rounded picture of the Jahai in the twenty-first century, celebrating their cultural idiosyncrasies, while being honest about the challenges they face in an increasingly globalised society.

community's knowledge and hunting habits regarding 11 wild mammal species, including the giant squirrel, white-handed gibbon, wild boar, porcupine, barking deer, sambar deer, sun bear, Malayan tapir, gaur, tiger, and Asian elephant.

In general, the Jahai continue to use traditional hunting methods. The Jahai hunters perceived 10 of the 11 wildlife species to be somewhat less abundant than before. Elephants were the only species considered to have stable numbers; no species was considered to be increasing. Hunting was mainly for self-consumption, and the trading of meat with outsiders was reported to be very rare. There were some differences in hunting habits and prey preferences among the three villages. For example, large animals such as gaurs, tapirs, and sun bears were exclusively hunted in Tiang, the largest of the three villages.

There was a correlation between Jahai prey preferences and actual hunting practices but there were also some mismatches. Tapirs, for example, were preferred but were not actually hunted. The researchers do not know why this discrepancy exists. Wild boars, on the other hand, were hunted more frequently than suggested by their relative preference, probably due to their abundance and ready availability in Belum.

adhere to specific food restrictions to prevent illness, such as avoiding the consumption of certain animals like pigs or monkeys. In the forest, customs discourage the lodging of complaints, indiscriminate cutting of large trees, and timber harvesting, unless the tree is confirmed to have a core, traditionally determined by tapping it.

The Jahai community observe various taboos rooted in their customs and traditions. These include avoiding leaving the house at dusk to prevent spirit interference.

Values, norms and taboos (Likin et al., 2020)

Likin et al. (2020) executed a study on the traditional knowledge of the Jahai Indigenous community in Kampung Semelor. The methodology employed in the study was structured interviews.

The Jahai community observe various taboos rooted in their customs and traditions. These include avoiding leaving the house at dusk to prevent spirit interference, prohibiting pregnant women from visiting the riverbank at dusk, and abstaining from consuming monkey, ape, or pig meat due to spiritual beliefs. Restrictions are also placed on walking long distances or entering the forest under certain conditions. Traditional rituals include the Sewang ceremony for six-month-old babies, which releases them from dietary restrictions and protects them from bad/evil spirits. Young children, aged three to four, must

Based on Likin et al.'s (2020) study, the researchers found that young people lack concrete opportunities to participate in seasonal subsistence activities. This in turn has led to a decline in traditional knowledge, which the younger generation no longer deem to be necessary; even those who show interest in preserving it often lack the necessary practical experience.

Perspectives on tiger conservation (Hamzah et al., 2023)

The work of Hamzah et al. (2023) documented the perspectives of the Jahai community in Royal Belum State Park, Gerik, Perak, regarding tigers, particularly from the viewpoint of the Menraq patrol team and several elders who have been exposed to conventional conservation interventions through their work. This case study employed semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and collaborative cultural mapping with the

Jahai Menraq team and several elders from the Jahai community.

The study found that the Jahai Menraq team relies on spiritual protection from tigers, known as 'ceboh' (tʃə'bo) tigers, when engaging in forest-related activities, including their patrolling duties. In the context of 'ceboh', supernatural powers are harnessed to safeguard the Jahai people from dangers in the forest, which reflects the significance of the forest in their traditional nomadic lifestyle as part of their traditional nomadic lifestyle. Even though the Jahai are now only semi-nomadic and more settled, the practice continues, especially when they need to travel through the forest. The term 'ceboh' refers to a magical stone with healing and supernatural abilities, which only shamans can obtain and use to transfer powers to humans and animals. The spiritual power of Jahai shamans is conceptualised in the form of a hierarchy, with the most powerful being called Halak (hə'lək).

The Jahai describe 'ceboh' as 'cooling', 'located in the heart', and capable of

realm through dreams and communicates with spirits, including animals, deities, and ancestors. The shaman can also transfer the powers of 'ceboh' to animals in the forest, such as deer, elephants, and tigers, to protect the Jahai people from real threats in the forest.

Song lyric composition: *Pinloin* (Clare, 2016)

Clare (2016) conducted a study on the song lyrics of the Jahai community's *pinloin*, a traditional genre of song and dance used in pano ceremonies (séances) and crop fertility rituals. The research took place in Kampung Sungai Raba, Kampung Air Banun, and Kampung Sungai Tiang, RPS Air Banun, from April 2015 to April 2016.

According to Clare, the lyrics and music of *pinloin* are taught to Jahai healers, known as Hala' Jahai, by spirit guides, or *chenoi*, through dreams, which often reflect Malaysia's flora and fauna. Over time, however, *pinloin* has transformed from a ritualistic practice into a form of entertainment for tourists and visitors.

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healing and providing protection. Shamans typically acquire or transfer these powers through rituals called *sewang* (sɛ'wəŋ) or 'pinglun' (pɪŋ'lun), often performed in front of village members with traditional music. During 'pinglun', the shaman enters a magical

Researchers have identified three key factors influencing the Jahai community's interest in *pinloin*: first, the community's decreased reliance on the forest for their livelihood has reduced their dependence on forest spirit guides for protection and healing, as they now turn to modern

medicine for health issues. Second, many Jahai individuals have converted to Islam due to its strong presence in Malaysia. Third, the influence of mass media, including radio and television, has altered the musical preferences of the Jahai community.

During fieldwork in 2015, Clare discovered that Radio Televisyen

Enjok identified five original Jahai *pinloin* songs: 1) *Cel Yop Selantis* ("Owl Song"), 2) *Berk Tadok Yek* ("Mother, Wait for Us"), 3) *Salom Pangwei* ("Floating Salom Fruit Song"), 4) *Lagu Jelmol* ("Mountain Song"), and 5) *Lagu Wongkawau* (Song of the Red and Black Broadbill). Clare's study focused on *Cel Yop Selantis* and *Salom Pangwei*.

The pinloin songs feature poetic and symbolic storytelling have led to challenges in preserving their traditional meanings and performance styles.

Malaysia (RTM) had recorded Jahai music in the late 1990s, though little documentation was made of the singers or song titles. Clare chose to study the song *Wongkawau* ("Song of the Black and Red Rakitan Bird"), which is still recognised by the Jahai community. The song was performed by the late Ahung bin Kimbis, with his brother, Enjok bin Kimbis, assisting Clare in transcribing the lyrics and interpreting their meanings, though some lines proved difficult to understand. The family noted that older singers often used poetic language with ambiguous meanings. As a village elder and the brother of a notable *hala'* and *pinloin* singer, Enjok was central to the study. A former member of the Senoi Praaq, which he joined in 1954, aged 15, Enjok now periodically visits his village as part of his retirement. During performances, he strives to recall the lyrics, while the women work to reconstruct the tempo and rhythm.

Cel Yop Selantis depicts a tranquil night, with the sound of breaking twigs prompting an owl perched in a tree to check for intruders in the forest. *Salom Pangwei* tells the story of the *buah machang* (*Mangifera foetida*), a seasonal fruit resembling a mango, with a green exterior, white interior, and white petals. The song describes how the fruit, when it falls from its branch, is carried away by the swift current of a river.

Nonetheless, according to Clare, Enjok's singing in the *pinloin* song "Salom Pangwei" and previous songs indicates that the meaning of the song's lyrics does not correspond to its title. The singing style observed in the musical notes is a "call and response" between the soloist and the chorus.

Commodification of indigenous culture through tourism (Ahmad Zam Zam, 2015)

Ahmad Zam Zam's (2015) study examined the Jahai Orang Asli community in the Air Banun Resettlement Plan (RPS), Gerik, Perak, and their involvement in the tourism industry. The study highlighted how the community's traditional culture is being packaged as a commodity to attract

This search for an 'authentic' experience has led both the indigenous community and tourism companies to create and 'modify' elements of Jahai culture to serve as a 'gaze' for tourists. Tourists are not only interested in learning about traditional culture but also want to engage in the daily activities of indigenous peoples through products designed to meet their 'wants' and 'tastes.'

The Jahai community balances participation in the tourism industry as a source of income with the challenge of preserving their cultural identity while facing socio-economic impacts.

tourists, driving efforts to preserve their cultural identity. Using in-depth interviews with 12 community members and participant observations, the research categorised cultural products, identified forms and factors of participation, and explored mechanisms for sustaining their cultural identity.

Due to the scarcity of forest resources, the Jahai communities in Kampung Air Banun, Kampung Sungai Tiang, Kampung Sungai Kejar, Kampung Desa Permai, Kampung Sungai Raba, Kampung Chuweh and Kampung Semelor, have turned to the ecotourism industry as a primary and supplementary source of income, utilising their indigenous knowledge to foster creativity. The cultural products of indigenous communities are in high demand among tourists, especially foreign visitors motivated by a desire to 'seek authenticity'.

The findings identify that the indigenous community undertake various strategies to balance the desire to participate in the tourism industry and the need to maintain the sustainability of their cultural identity. This research also found that the development of tourism activities amongst the indigenous group is possible; however, a more sustainable approach is suggested to ensure the preservation of indigenous cultural identity.

Impacts of the Temenggor Dam on the socio-economic conditions of the Jahai (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2022)

Mohd Yusoff et al. (2022) conducted a study on the impact of the Temenggor Dam construction on the socio-economic conditions of the Jahai community. The study showed that the dam has seriously affected their livelihood. A significant

portion of the forest that previously supplied them with vital resources has been destroyed. This construction has erased nearly all of their long-inhabited land, leading to a decline in their physical and mental wellbeing. This ancestral land held deep meanings and values that are essential to their daily lives.

Additionally, the dam forced the Jahai community to integrate into mainstream society through the RPS programme. This integration has brought persistent challenges, including unemployment, higher living costs, school dropouts, and various other issues stemming from ineffective adaptation to the mainstream system. The lifestyle shift and economic pressures have left them trapped in poverty.

Despite the fact that over 30 years have passed since the Temenggor Hydroelectric Dam began contributing to national socio-economic development, the Jahai community in RPS Air Banun has seen little progress. They lack stable income sources, with low education levels. Furthermore, the remote location of their settlement, distanced from Gerik, limits

stakeholders, particularly JAKOA and related agencies, is crucial. Additionally, land development programmes must be reintroduced with more comprehensive and strategic planning (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the Jahai community's rich cultural and ecological heritage is a testament to their deep connection with their natural environment and unique way of life. However, the challenges stemming from forced resettlement, poverty, and socio-cultural disintegration pose significant threats to their identity and wellbeing. Their spiritual practices, rituals, and musical traditions remain vital, yet they are increasingly at risk of dilution or extinction due to external influences. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive and culturally sensitive interventions that prioritise sustainable development and the preservation of their traditions. By valuing and supporting the Jahai's unique heritage, there is hope to safeguard their cultural and ecological legacy for future generations.

There was an urgent need for culturally sensitive interventions to preserve the Jahai people's heritage and improve their socio-economic conditions.

their access to consistent employment opportunities. Environmental changes and the degradation of natural resources have further exacerbated their struggles.

To improve their socio-economic conditions, proactive support from

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