



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i9/11050> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i9/11050

**Received:** 09 July 2021, **Revised:** 03 August 2021, **Accepted:** 28 August 2021

**Published Online:** 12 September 2021

**In-Text Citation:** (Adnan et al., 2021)

**To Cite this Article:** Adnan, A. H. M., Shah, D. S. M., Tahir, M. H. M., Salim, M. S. A. M., & Yusof, A. M. (2021). The Lived Experiences and Non-formal Education of Malaysian 'Orang Asli' (Native People) Youngsters. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(9), 682–695.

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Vol. 11, No. 9, 2021, Pg. 682 - 695

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[www.hrmars.com](http://www.hrmars.com)

ISSN: 2222-6990

## The Lived Experiences and Non-formal Education of Malaysian 'Orang Asli' (Native People) Youngsters

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### Abstract

Even though we have effectively completed a fifth of this new century, non-formal education through community-based learning and other traditional avenues of learning persist as powerful forces in the growth of the human lifespan, particularly for native peoples who have thousands of years of local knowledge. Focusing on Malaysia's Orang Asli (native peoples), this study was conducted to map the field until a more detailed research project is undertaken for the next two years at the Royal Belum State Park in Perak State, Malaysia. Six Orang Asli adolescents (three females and three males) from two local higher learning institutions in Perak were interviewed individually and through focus group sessions regarding their engagement with non-formal education within their own communities, from when they were much younger up to this present time. This study focuses on three non-formal educational permutations as operationalised by our guiding (research) questions. First, as tales of the world around the participants that were shared in their communities by their elders and transmitted from one generation to the next one. Second, as an understanding of first-hand aboriginal knowledge that is unique to their own cultures and still practised by some members

of the group. And third, as a complementary form of education that goes hand in hand with the formal schooling process, especially for young children of Orang Asli descent. The 'thick' qualitative data presented and discussed in this study deepen our understanding of non-formal education for and by the Orang Asli in Malaysia, as examined through contemporary lenses.

**Keywords:** Adolescent Development, Community-Based Learning, Indigenous Knowledge, Native Peoples, Non-Formal Education, Qualitative Research.

### Introduction

In contemporary Malaysia, the question of Orang Asli (literally 'original peoples') education has been posed time and time again (Chupil & Joseph, 2003; Joseph, 2008; Lye, 2001; Nah, 2008). Access to quality education has been a problem for the diverse Orang Asli population since the years following Malaysia's independence from colonial rule in 1957. Living off the land, often at the fringes of society and in remote areas of the virgin jungle of Peninsular Malaysia, problems still exist in the present with regards to Orang Asli education, particularly the low levels of formal educational achievement of some Orang Asli children and adolescents (see Abu Kassim & Adnan, 2005; Adnan & Saad, 2010; Adnan, 2010, 2012). Studies have shown that some teenagers in Orang Asli communities choose to find a job or to do odd jobs instead of pursuing their secondary education after completing their primary one (see Salim et al., 2020). This puts the population of the Orang Asli as a whole in a weakened state within the complicated layers of modern Malaysian society and the march of Malaysia towards fully developed nation status (see Adnan & Smith, 2001; Adnan, 2011). While the school system includes success stories of Orang Asli children and adolescents, there are also many reports of Orang Asli dropouts and failures in Malaysian formal education (Shah et al., 2020).

Due to these issues, some Orang Asli youths are labelled as underachievers and those who do not show inclination towards formal education (Idrus, 2010). This widespread negative view of Orang Asli youths is compounded by their lack of access to quality formal education and other problems plaguing this diverse native group (Ghani, 2015), such as malnutrition and general health problems, and also the inability to continue their original lifestyles because of the government's takeover of their native lands for development projects. Although there are many reasons for the problems that continue to threaten the lives of the Orang Asli in Malaysia that fall beyond the reach of this research article, perhaps the most important challenge facing the Orang Asli right now is for them to continue with their specific beliefs and customs but to also engage in the government-of-the-day's modernisation agendas (see Shah et al., 2020). At the opposite end of the continuum, the government and other stakeholders interested in the Orang Asli's existence must also begin to establish a worldview that is special to the Orang Asli; a worldview that appreciates and cherishes the Orang Asli's unique lifestyles and practices, for example one that puts high value on non-formal education in the everyday lives of all members of the Orang Asli community in Peninsular Malaysia.

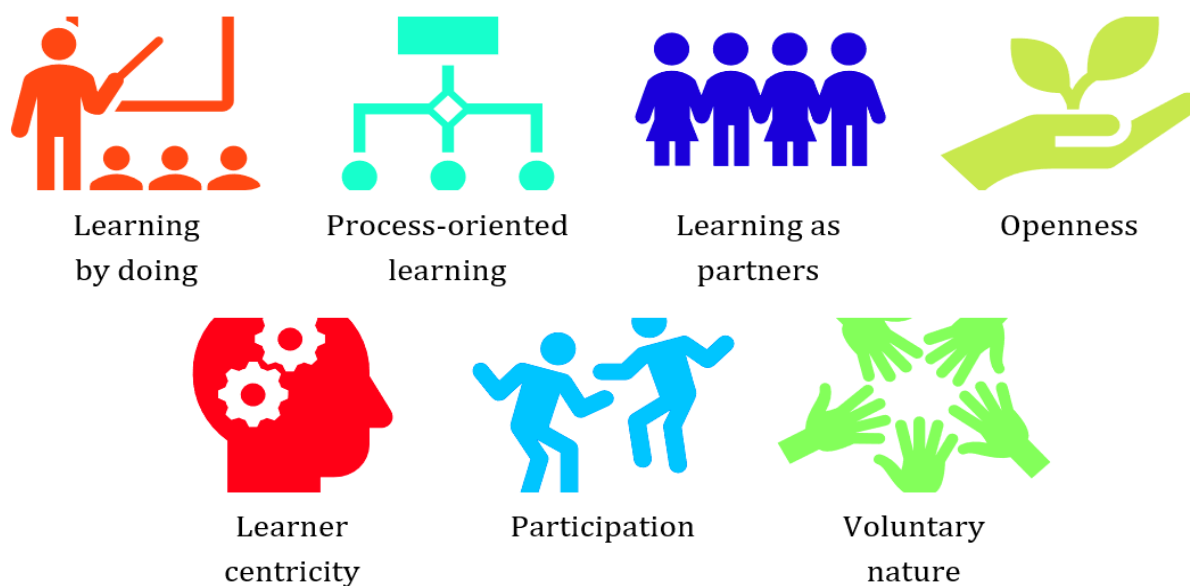
### Review of Research Literature

This section reviews literature related to the focus areas of this research article. It is divided into three subsections: The model of non-formal education, the life of the Orang Asli in Malaysia and ending with Orang Asli education issues.

### The Non-formal Education Model

In the 1960s, when traditional educational institutions experienced an economic crisis that raised questions about their lack of capacity to adapt to a changing global climate, the term 'non-formal education' and its worldwide popularity came about. At present, it is hard to create a single all-encompassing model of non-formal education. Coombs, Prosser and Ahmed (1973) in Carron and Carr-Hill (1991) state that non-formal education consists of educational activities conducted outside the formal system and it is designed to serve recognizable clientele and educational objectives. On the other hand, according to Kedrayate (1997), informal education can be defined as a lifetime cycle through which a person acquires beliefs, principles, skills and knowledge through day-to-day practice, educational experiences and the tools of her or his community namely from his or her family and friends, the economy, library and the mass media. Non-formal learning activities are thus conducted in a flexible style of teaching with regards to the pace and length of instruction, the age groups of the learning community, and the quality and technique of learning. Hence, the ultimate goal is to offer those who experience it access to practical know-how that the society needs as compared to merely theoretical knowledge.

Additionally, non-formal education for all genders, social backgrounds and interests become more widely available as it was in the annals of history. 'Modern' non-formal education is largely seen as a relatively free kind of education, with a variety of methods of teaching. Hussain (2014) notes that non-formal education should be tailored to meet children's educational needs, as this is necessary for their effective functioning in a society. It can therefore be understood that non-formal education is generally seen as an alternative form of education that is not restricted by age or an excessive formalism but with plurality of goals, purposes, and meanings. This model of non-formal education provides the skills by which children can strive to acquire a better understanding of their own selves and their immediate environment. It also helps them to solve daily problems. Non-formal education is therefore believed to be a practical solution for strengthening the formal education system. Sharma and Choudhary (2015) propose seven key features of non-formal learning to make a clear distinction between the formal and the non-formal schooling process. The seven features are illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Features of the Model of Non-formal Education / Learning**

The first feature is to learn through doing. The focus is on concrete actions such as assuming social responsibility, rather than simply learning theories or communicating through the teaching personnel. The second feature is process-oriented learning. The learning process can be adapted throughout by learners without focusing on the curriculum and length of time. The third feature is learning as partners. This is because non-formal education focuses on constructive, collaborative approaches and dynamic group systems. The next feature is that of openness. This relates to the openness of the non-formal education process, which means that one's own ideas will often be updated and re-evaluated. This contributes to numerous practices in general. Plus, the transparency paves the way for participants to actively engage in shaping learning experiences since the topics and results are transparent and not subjective.

Another feature is learner centricity. It relates to strategies and goals that are aimed at individual participants in non-formal education and tailored to their needs and interests as much as possible. The sixth feature is participation, whereby shared responsibility and self-determination are both goals in engaging with children and young people, as well as an essential pedagogical way of operating. The seventh and last feature of non-formal learning is its voluntary nature. The participation of the child is not statutory, and parents can therefore freely decide to take advantage of what is offered or not depending on their preferences. Based on these seven features, it can be concluded that the non-formal classification covers a wide range of educational systems with characteristics that contribute either to or away from the established formal systems in place.

### **Living as 'Orang Asli' in Malaysia**

The Orang Asli is the original or native ethnic minority inhabitants of the Malaysian Peninsular. 'Orang Asli' refers to original or 'primitive' peoples made up of 18 sub-ethnic groups commonly classified under Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay for official purposes (Jamiran & Seow, 2013) with 133,755 total population count (see Ang et al., 2011). However, Benjamin (2002) as cited in Ghani (2015) categorised the Orang Asli under four broad categories according to the ethnic language that they use. The groups are the Northern Aslian (the Jahaic), the Central Aslian (the Senoic), the Jah Hut and the Southern Aslian (the Semelaic).

The Senoi are Malaysia's biggest group of Orang Asli. They make up about 56% of the total population of the whole community. Their subgroups are found primarily in central Pahang (Jah Hut and Che Wong), Coastal Selangor (Mah Meri) and in south-eastern Pahang (Semoq Beri) and also in the states of Perak, Pahang, and Kelantan (Semai and Temiar). Some sub-groups rely on the forest for nourishment through foraging, yet others have started long-lasting farms, as well as work on wage-related activities. On the other hand, the Semai is a semi-sedentary ethnic group in central South-Eastern Asia on the Malay Peninsular and they are known especially for their non-violent ways. They are also known as the Mai Semai or Orang Dalam. Their language has been shaped by various languages for instance Mon, Khmer, Thai and Malay. The indigenous Orang Asli population have unique belief systems, systems of culture and values. At the same time, they retain valuable knowledge in sustainable natural resources management due to their affinity with the jungle.

It is believed that Orang Asli communities did not originate from the same ancestry based on the historiography of the majority Malaysian communities and the Orang Asli communities. The Orang Asli is a Neolithic nomadic tribe from Africa that originated from the Negrito group about 40,000 years ago, whilst the Malayan people are from the Yunan

Highlands in Southern China (see N. Shah, Rus, Mustapha, Hussain & Wahab, 2018). In the last thousands of years, the migration path of nomadic cultures from Europe to Australia through the Malay Peninsular had been based on similar remnants of historical artefacts left behind on many continents. Due to this history, Malaysia accepted the Orang Asli as part of the 'Bumiputera' community and protects their rights under the Aboriginal Peoples Act (1954, revised 1974) and The Malaysian Federal Constitution (1957). The government of Malaysia also set up the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JAKOA) in 1953 under the Ministry of Rural Development, to oversee the activities of the diverse Orang Asli population. JAKOA carries out numerous projects to improve the social mobility and social welfare of the Orang Asli population, such as through health programs to improve access to healthcare and also education programs to improve Orang Asli job skills. JAKOA is also responsible to maintain the uniqueness of Orang Asli identity, culture, and heritage in present day Malaysia into the future.

### **Orang Asli Education Issues in Malaysia**

As noted above, the Orang Asli overall educational achievement as an indigenous ethnic group in Malaysia remains generally low and the number of Orang Asli children and teenagers dropping out of primary and secondary schools is still high in 2019. Most Orang Asli group members only obtain formal education at the primary level. Moreover, there is a noticeable pattern where most of the Orang Asli students who completed their primary education chose not to pursue their secondary studies. This is partly due to their lack of knowledge about formal education and their socioeconomic status, which is very low for many family groups. These factors impede upon concerted efforts to ensure that children and teenagers from Orang Asli families are provided with quality educational provisions (Aini, Don & Isa, 2019).

At the same time, such problems are commonly associated with several other factors, for example inconducive school environment including teaching and learning issues (Shah and Adnan, 2020) and also lack of motivation on the importance of education from the surrounding community (Lambin et al., 2018). This is parallel with the study by Rabahi, Yusof and Awang (2016) who found that the reasons for Orang Asli children to drop out from school are lack of interest in schooling, negative attitudes toward formal learning, having to live in poverty, lack of support from schools, lack of awareness amongst parents, inconducive school environment and sociocultural climate. Hence, we can argue that some members of the Orang Asli community do not have a positive feeling regarding education. In addition, some of them do not believe that education is important to their lives and to their families.

That being said, there are also members of the Orang Asli community who feel that schooling is a good way of alleviating their lives and helping them break out of the vicious poverty cycle. The school is an environment where youngsters from these Orang Asli families learn many things for the first time. Indeed, research has shown that it is only when children of Orang Asli descent attend school that they feel 'special' (Nordin, Hassan & Danjuma, 2018). One of the Orang Asli participants in that study shared that she enjoyed schooling because she had made many friends. In school, Orang Asli youngsters can carry out a variety of activities together, for example singing songs, playing musical instruments, drawing shapes, and writing the alphabets or Jawi scripts (Rabahi, Yusof & Awang, 2016). Another participant recounted how her mother started to realize that formal schooling and formal education can transform an individual's future. This Orang Asli mother had high expectations of her child. So, following her husband's death two weeks after her child's birth, she tried to ensure that

her child did not miss kindergarten classes and ensuing school years. The mother then moved to a place which was nearby the school and worked as a farmer there. The mother then received basic learning materials at home, such as coloured pencils, and she began daily routines to encourage and promote the learning of her daughter. Her initiatives show that parental involvement not only enhances academic performance, but also has positive influence on a student's attitude and behaviour regardless of ethnicity.

Undoubtedly, parental involvement and support in a child's education will affect the child's approach to learning, classroom performance, self-esteem, absenteeism, and motivation (see Adnan, 2009). Looking at the wider picture, according to the then Malaysian Deputy Minister of Rural and Regional Development, the number of Orang Asli adolescents who attended local Teacher Education Institutes during the same period was 53. Additionally, about 5,000 Orang Asli adolescents have advanced their education to public higher education institutions (IPTA) between years 2010 to 2018. These statistics show that the Orang Asli community are comparable in terms of educational attainment with more urban communities. So, instead of focusing on the customs and way-of-life of the Orang Asli population that might disadvantage them within the context of a developing nation, we should also look at how facets of those customs and traditions contribute to the unique worldview of Orang Asli children, teenagers and adolescents. One of those facets is the important place of non-formal education within the lives of Orang Asli youngsters.

### **Research Background and Research Procedures**

Six Orang Asli adolescents (three females and three males) from two higher learning institutions in Perak were interviewed individually and through focus group discussions regarding their experience with non-formal education or learning within their own communities, from when they were younger until they became tertiary students. To limit the study, we focused on three ways in which non-formal education or learning is experienced by the participants. First, as stories about the world around them that were told by elders in their communities and passed on from one generation to the next generation. Second, as first-hand experience on indigenous knowledge that is unique to their own communities and is still practised by certain community members. And third, as a complementary form of education that work together with the formal process of schooling, particularly for young Orang Asli children.

Data were gathered in the beginning of 2020 and the whole process only took two weeks to complete as this study is meant to only 'map the field', before a more extensive research is carried out for the next two years. Open protocols were used seeking answers to deepen our understanding of non-formal education for and by the Orang Asli in the Malaysian context, as examined through contemporary lenses. The data collected were organised based on themes and sub-themes, and data analysis happened during the process of data collection as is norm with qualitative and ethnographic research. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their identities; comments shared in the next section were minimally edited so as to present the actual ideas and preserve the ideological nuances by participants.

### **Data Presentation and Data Analysis**

As mentioned above, two qualitative instruments were used in this research project to collect 'thick' data, namely interviews, and focus group discussions. These were conducted with participants from selected research sites in the state of Perak, Malaysia which consisted of pre-diploma and diploma students. All the participants are of ethnic Semai origin, living in

Perak state. The data collected highlight the influence of non-formal education on the overall learning processes of the members of the Orang Asli community; the data also show the links between local knowledge (i.e., unique native knowledge of the Orang Asli) and formal education through the schooling process. Figure 2 illustrates three core themes that arise from the study, and these are illustrated with examples in the following sub-sections.



**Figure 2. Core themes emerging from this research project**

### **‘Influence of Orang Asli Families on Non-Formal Learning’**

Throughout recent years, non-formal education and learning has become increasingly important. Considering that the goals of non-formal education are broad and diverse, there is a wide range of non-formal learning activities available for Orang Asli children and teenagers. As ‘Jani’ puts it, “When it comes to learning I guess all peoples are the same, everything will start in the family. For us Semai people, it’s the same too. We learn all the good values and knowledge from our families first.” As a Diploma in Computer Science student, Jani believes that in general all Orang Asli families, regardless of ethnic group, view the process of formal schooling in positive light. However, access to formal learning is sometimes hard for them leading to many of his peers dropping out from school. At the same time, all of our participants generally have a positive outlook on formal education and formal learning. Being tertiary level students, they are very much interested in education and they aspire to have a good career through the process of formal education.

As for ‘Rina’ from an Orang Asli village in Slim River, Perak, she started her education from home when she was still a little girl. According to Rina, there are many Orang Asli families who still live in rural areas as subsistence farmers who practice diversified agriculture and often a form of rotational farming combined with wet paddy, tapioca, fruit, and vegetables. And so, in her family, her mother taught Rina the traditional ways to plant and pick vegetables. She shares her early experience as someone who lives from the land: “My mother, she taught me to plant different vegetables and to fish too. Basically, we are very experienced in doing those things. Everyone needs to eat right?” She knows how to fish efficiently because her father used to bring her to the river and showed her the many ways to fish. In her village, Rina’s people mainly engage in fishing, together with cultivation of vegetables and edible plants for their own consumption. Living in harmony with nature and taking care of the world around her was one of the earliest non-formal lessons taught to her by her parents.

Still, Jani and Rina with the other participants in this study realized that schooling must also play an important role in their lives. They are quite lucky because all of their parents gave them the opportunity to go to school, to continue schooling and to complete the schooling process. Not all families in their respective villages gave the same support to the younger generation. ‘Sarah’ from an Orang Asli village in Tapah, Perak recounts how her parents “pushed” her to go to school. Her parents said that in school, she will get a lot of knowledge that her parents cannot teach. “So, I go to school so that I can learn how to read, write and



count even though my parents didn't even finish their primary level schooling. Book learning is important for my future career," Sarah professes. She adds:

Being an Orang Asli person isn't easy. Other people like to bully us. So, my village elders they made sure all the families send all the kids to go to school, to learn to read. ... This is to prevent us from getting tricked to sell our lands because outsiders always try to bribe and trick us to get our lands. They then destroy all our native lands for commercial profit. So, our grandfathers and grandmothers asked us to go to school so that we can read. There are so many people who want to take our lands. Since now we can read, we can understand the agreements written.

As previously mentioned, tragically not all Orang Asli families understand that formal education can change the lives of their children for the better and they only rely on the process of non-formal learning to impart knowledge within their communities. According to Rina, there are still many Orang Asli children who are not sent to school because their parents are afraid of the outside world. She shared that her mother had the same thought at the first place but because she would like Rina to be educated and further her study to change their life, her mother tried so hard to overcome the feeling. Her mother was very positive to send her to school even though she is worried that one day Rina might lose her identity as a Semai girl. Rina continues, "Even now, my mother will always be worried because she is afraid that somebody will kidnap us Semai youngsters and maybe even kill us!" Negative perceptions about outsiders is not uncommon to the Orang Asli population. 'Mikel' recounts his own experience:

You can't blame us Orang Asli is we don't trust people easily. In my village, even the government officers trick us to take our lands and destroy our farms. They say "this is not your land", but we've been here since how many hundred years? So, some parents they don't like their children to go to school. The kids just stay home and learn about farming, making huts, finding food off the land, you know all the traditional things. But these things won't make us [the Semai people] modern. We also need new knowledge, modern knowledge so that our people will become richer and stronger. I feel sad for my own people, but many outsiders actually make life hard for us. This is the reality.

At the same time, according to Sarah, some of the parents from her village could not afford to send their children to school because they have a lot of other children to care for. Most of these families are single parent families; they are mostly single mothers who need to undertake the arduous task to raise many children on their own. Sara emphatically explains:

When the children have co-curriculum activities in the afternoon, it's going to be extremely difficult for the mother to concentrate on the things she is doing and to take care of the little siblings. So, who is going to take care of other younger siblings if the mother needs to go pick up that child in school? In order to lessen that stress, the mother just gives up on schooling that child. She has to let go of her children's formal education because she doesn't want to burn out and she still must put food on the table. The family just relies on informal education to

get by, and the cycle continues and continues. Like this, when will our community improve?

### **‘Local Knowledge of Orang Asli and Non-formal Learning’**

Local knowledge is simply the knowledge that has developed over time from people who live in a certain location. It is also often referred to as indigenous knowledge or traditional knowledge. Local knowledge is a combination of old knowledge and new knowledge that some people acquire from other people, from other cultures and from engaging with the immediate environment around them. Sarah, during the interview, shares that her grandmother taught her about treating fractured bones using creeping plants in the jungle. When she was a child, she experienced this first-hand by looking at her grandmother treating her cousin who was involved in an accident and his foot was broken. The cousin was sent to the hospital; however, the healing process took a long time. Hence, her grandmother asked her to find these creeping plants (she cannot remember the names of the plants). The creeping plants were used as a brace to support, align or hold a body part in the correct position. Sarah explains, “My grandmother wrapped my cousin’s foot with the plants. It really helped to support his foot. The procedure was to bring the foot back to its correct position. ... My cousin was healed in less than a week!”

Sarah mentions a news item in Gua Musang, Kelantan where seven Orang Asli children ran out of their school into the jungle. The children managed to survive because they had learned the survival skills taught to them by their families and community members. This proves that living with nature using traditional methods can help the Orang Asli to survive its harsh conditions. Through the practice of non-formal education, Orang Asli elders still continue to teach their young about survival skills through the knowledge of plants, animals and geology of their surroundings. In the process, Orang Asli children and teenagers can learn to appreciate the utility of various plant species, including the activities and patterns of the animal species inhabiting the local area. Their awareness of their surroundings is also enhanced when they can pay attention to geological characteristics, which tell them where water and other resources are likely to be. ‘Che Senik’ recounts his own experience, living in a village in Gerik, Perak:

My late father was a great Army tracker and also a hunter. I think as soon as the first time I learned to walk, I was already taught about animal tracks and plants and magic things you’re not supposed to do in the jungle. When I was a bit bigger, my father would take me hunting. I learned so many things you can’t learn from the textbooks. This is the richness of Orang Asli tradition. But now, now many of our young people are starting to forget this. But, they’re also lazy to go to school. ... They are trapped in nowhere! They don’t have the Orang Asli knowledge, but they also don’t have the book knowledge from school. What will happen to them in future?

### **‘Attitudes of the Orang Asli towards Non-Formal Learning’**

It goes without saying that this empirical research is not a representative document of all the Orang Asli communities scattered in Peninsular Malaysia. At the same time, the picture being painted regarding Orang Asli education is not a particularly positive one as the quote from Che Senik serves to highlight. Some Orang Asli youngsters are not only losing sight of the importance of their local knowledge and traditions, they are also being disenfranchised

from modernity due to their reluctance to learn formally from the national schooling system. It is true that access to quality formal education or schooling has always been a bane in the lives of the Orang Asli peoples of Malaysia. That being said, the situation has been getting better since the years after Malaysia's independence from colonial rule.

For the six participants in this study, they are perhaps very lucky to come from supportive parents, families and communities who understand the importance of "book knowledge" that can only come from primary and secondary schooling up to college and university. The participants' experiences also show that local knowledge does not have to go against book knowledge, and both can and should co-exist together within the hearts and minds of Orang Asli children and teenagers. As 'Ning' the third female participant argues:

It's easy to say we Orang Asli peoples don't like to learn, we're lazy or that we're all just stupid. Even in school, some of my teachers easily just blame us like that. Yes, some [Orang Asli] youngsters are just hopeless but other races are also like that, right? Even in the Western countries the problem is like that. At the same time, many Orang Asli peoples understand the need to be modern, to find modern jobs but still take care of the jungle, the plants and the animals. This, for me, is our peoples' greatest strength. We can be modern, but we also take care of the world. Not like the rich, modern people who just take and take from the land then destroy everything, until we get environmental problems like global warming and other problems.

All of the participants believe that their positive attitudes helped to motivate them to learn beyond non-formal education within their families and communities. Of course, being young and energetic they are still interested in having fun and fitting in the community because they believe learning and continuing their studies is needed for a healthy and enjoyable life in the future. Their parents and families continue to be supportive by putting their children's needs first. Sarah's comment summarises this crux of this sub-section:

I always wanted to learn because so few Orang Asli children will further their study in IPT [colleges and universities]. Now, at university, when I go to class, I will always focus and try to learn as much new knowledge as I can. I struggle a lot actually, but I don't easily give up because I have my own dreams, my own ambitions for the future. When I was a little girl, my father taught me Bahasa Melayu, Maths and also English even though he is also not too good in learning. Because of him pushing me and pushing me, now I know so much more than just to read and to count.

## Conclusion

The data in this study indicate the significance of non-formal education in the lives of children and teenagers of Orang Asli heritage. Although the shortcomings of Orang Asli youths within the Malaysian education system have been well reported, it is a common misconception that all Orang Asli youths do not like studying or that they are simply 'indolent'. Data in the previous section indicate that the Orang Asli distinguishes their local and conventional knowledge with 'book knowledge' from the schooling and formal education process. Perhaps more importantly, at least for the participants in this study, they claim that a mixture of non-formal education and formal education makes them better individuals with stronger

principles and values when compared to people with book knowledge who only want to take advantage of anything and everything to become wealthy, and on that path they will ruin our world.

More importantly for future researchers, the problems posed and the stories told by the participants in this empirical research project open up avenues for investigation with respect to the non-formal education and learning cycle, and how these contribute to or even detract from the lives of Orang Asli children and adolescents in 2020 and beyond. The concerns raised and the stories discussed in this empirical research article must be further studied by relevant stakeholders not only to ensure the survival of the cultures and traditions of the Orang Asli, but more importantly to ensure the welfare of the peoples of Orang Asli descent within Malaysia's rapidly developing society.

### **Acknowledgement**

This empirical research project is supported by the 'Lestari Sustainable Development Goals Triangle or LESTARI SDG TRIANGLE' research grant from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), file number 600-RMC/LESTARI SDG-T 5/3 (094/2019) – "*Quality Education and Inequality Reduction through the Practice of Informal Learning by Native Communities in Royal Belum*" – led by Dr. Airil Haimi from UiTM, Malaysia with his team members Miss Dianna Suzieanna, Mr. Mohamad Safwat, Dr. Ahmad Muhyiddin together with Dr. Mohd Haniff from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, State of Perak, Malaysia.

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