

# **CROUCHING FOREST, RISING IDIOMS: LAND USE CHANGES IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA**

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Land use changes tend to be accompanied by a corresponding shift in environmental idioms. In this paper I revisit some common idioms relating to the perception of forests in Peninsular Malaysia. My purpose is to compare and contrast the perceptions of Batek minorities and Malay majorities. As Malay settlers expanded into the Peninsular, they encountered Orang Asli (“Sakai” in the colonial lingo) who provided a land use model to emulate — but which they ultimately rejected. For Orang Asli, Malays gave them a sense of difference. The more they felt impinged by Malay society, the more they acquired a sense of who they are in relation to the Malays. What is the linkage between ethnic differentiation and land use changes? Focusing on the Batek of Pahang, I suggest a dialectical process: had they not felt threatened by Malay society and retreated farther into the hinterlands, they would have assimilated with more ease. Today, the forest remains a refuge for them; at the same time, there is a rise in environmental consciousness. We find a Batek model of land use that they privilege as superior to the Malays’. My argument is that this model did not spring organically from some indigenous cultural source. Rather, it is an adaptation to changing land use models in the Peninsula, and mediated through the colonial encounter.

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