

No Squatting Over Still Waters

Focus: Orang Asli

It is critical to understand the customs of the Orang Asli (OA) if we are to be effective in ministering to them

By Rev. Lieow Meng Kuang

The OA are steeped in superstitions and taboos that have been developed and preserved for generations through adverse circumstances. Although many new things have been introduced into their life, for many, their mindset and way of life have not changed.

Understanding their customs means knowing their mindset. I am tempted to write about their many dos and don'ts as being aware of them have helped me during the 20 years of working among them. However, I will just dwell on one.

Among the major OA tribes, there is a long-held belief that squatting over still waters to 'do your business' will open the way for the 'spirit of water' to enter their stomachs, thereby causing



Serene scene of an OA village ... the OA's idyllic kampung life belies their deep bondage to fears of spirits.

their stomachs to swell. This may lead to a gruesome death.

This belief has been held rigidly for generations and so strict is it that whoever breaks the rule will be fined to appease the spirit.

No squatting over still waters means no toilets, so they go to

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Gathering the Tribes

There is now a more concerted effort to reach out to the Orang Asli in the peninsula with the set-up of the NECF Malaysia OA Ministry three years ago.

Not only has the commission brought a semblance of unity and cooperation to non-OA workers reaching out to the OA, it has also helped to bring together the OA workers and Christians from various tribes.

And, like their non-OA brethren throughout Malaysia who are clamouring for unity, the OA workers are calling for

oneness. Said OA worker Pr Miun Amat: "I hope the commission will open the Orang Asli's eye to see the need for unity and greater cooperation."

Added Pr Silvanus Tan: "I sincerely hope the commission can unite the OA churches to work together towards achieving the common goal, that is to be an independent OA Church."

Both Pr Miun and Pr Tan – founder members of the commission – are currently pastoring OA churches. Since getting involved in the commission, they have gained a greater appreciation and respect of the diversity in approach to ministry by the various denominations.

The few seminars and conferences have provided ample opportunity for them, and others, to work together and fellowship – an opportunity not available in the past as churches held their own training for their own congregations.

"The OA leaders from various denominations are now able to sit at the



Pr Miun

same table and discuss matters without being suspicious of each other. We feel comfortable with each other each time we meet," observed Pr Tan.

Besides pooling resources and exchanging ideas, the joint meetings have motivated and encouraged them to press on in their ministry, according to Pr Miun. That is because they are now able to share their personal struggles with each other, he explained.

The increasing cooperation and unity among the churches and workers involved in the OA ministry have greatly encouraged the commission to be even more proactive in its role as a facilitator. ■



Pr Tan

Focus: Orang Asli

Link Gospel to Culture

“Our people place great importance in our culture. If we present the Gospel without linking it to some of our cultural traditions, they may not accept it readily because they may think that we are preaching a kind of Western religion to them. So, for them to receive Jesus, we need to present Him in the Orang Asli manner. We need to ‘blend’ the Gospel with our culture.”

*Rev. Balahu Hassan
Full-time OA minister for the past
32 years*

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the rivers. The Health Department officials are not happy with this because we take our drinking water from the same rivers. Hoping to resolve the problem, the department built toilets for them but they end up as stores for firewood. Termites help to hasten the stores’ destruction. The department has given up on the OA and left them to their habits.

This toilet belief is so deeply ingrained that we have had OA children attending our Vacation Bible School dirtying our campsite to avoid going to the toilets. I have heard an OA said, “I am not going to camp because there is a lot of good food there. After getting used to eating, my stomach will grow big. When I return home I have to find more food to fill it.” I am sure he was also worried about having to move his bowels!

They are not only afraid of stomach problems, but also offending the ‘guardian spirits’ and their elders.

Actually, this ‘toilet’ belief has some good in it. Stagnant water is breeding ground for malaria-carrying mosquitoes and a person squatting over the still water may get infected by the parasite and die as a result. So, there is a medical explanation to this but the OA, of course, think it’s all because of spirits and their fears have bound them.

Medicine may help to convince them of their errors, but only the power of the Truth can dispel their fears. And only when we understand their superstitions and fears can we know precisely how to help them overcome their fears. ■

(Rev. Lieow is the NECF Malaysia OA Ministry Chairman.)

Not Lost in the City

DR S.K. TEOH shares how his church in Ipoh reached out to the Orang Asli who have migrated there

According to a recent newspaper report, there are 132,000 OA in the country and over half of them live on the outskirts of major towns and cities. Over the last 15 years, many Orang Asli (OA) have migrated from their villages to towns for work or studies.

Some of them continue to commute between their villages and the towns, not just because of the higher cost of living in the towns, but more so because they did not find acceptance with the other communities in towns.

Some OA confess that they feel out of place in the urban churches because of the wide disparity in educational and socio-economic status. Language is also another barrier to settling down.

Generally, urban churches have not extended their fellowship to their OA brethren, not because they do not want to, but because they do not know how to. Meanwhile, existing OA churches confine their ministry within their villages and are reluctant to work with the urban churches – even with those within the same denomination – to serve their people in the towns.

Reaching Out St Peter’s Anglican Church, Ipoh, (where I worship) started its first Bahasa Malaysia service seven years ago by first reaching out to policemen, many of whom were Orang Asli. The congregation grew from 15 to 70 as their relatives and friends joined in. Church leaders were invited to visit the *kampung*s (villages) where they came from to minister and reach out to their fellow villagers.

Soon after, another BM church was planted in Gopeng to serve the nearby villages.

To help our BM-speaking brethren – mainly OA – the churches provide transport (vans and schoolbuses) to ferry them to and from church meetings.

The Gopeng BM church even opened a *kedai ekonomi* (grocery shop) to supply sundry goods at reasonable prices, mainly to the OA. An OA part-time staffworker runs the shop, which is well-stocked like others, but without liquor and cigarettes.

Prices of the goods are generally 20 per cent lower than its competitors, thanks to a

volunteer who buys the goods from wholesalers. Clothes and kitchen utensils donated by church members are also sold there at nominal prices.

To help the OA integrate into the church, we encourage them to join the rest at the coffee fellowship in-between worship services. When the church holds dinners on special occasions, subsidies are given to the OA to enable them to participate. We also arranged for them to join several combined-churches celebrations in the city.

At the beginning of each year, the church donates RM50 each to 10 OA children to help with their school fees. Reading materials, used clothes and toys donated by church members are given to the OA. In addition, some church members give free tuition in English for OA students, while several OA adults have been given jobs by church members.

These are just some of the practical ways the church has taken to help the OA. But we have to help the OA look ahead, and that’s where our leadership training comes in. We are training them to lead their people and be self-reliant. ■

(Dr Teoh has his own gynaecological practice in Ipoh. He is deeply involved in the BM ministry and currently serves as a member of the NECF Malaysia BM Commission and Chairman of the BM Committee of the Anglican Church in West Malaysia and Congregation Leader of the BM Ministry in the church.)

The BM congregation of St Peter’s Anglican Church, Ipoh, comprises mainly the OA who find the church a good meeting place in the city to ‘hang out’.



Thanks to the Kedai Ekonomi, OA Elizabeth Wah Kiah now has a regular income.

