

Case Study of the Impact of Development on Indigenous Peoples (with Kirk Michael Endicott, Alberto G. Gomes and M. Barry Hooker; 1997) and iii) *The Semai: a nonviolent people of Malaysia* (1979).

Being ignorant about Orang Asli—or Hodinosauni—is part and parcel of the injustice they experience. Nobody really wants that. But our ignorance makes it possible.

Notes

1. Michael Marshall (2002) *The Straw Men*, pp. 284–5.
2. See, for example, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/97139>
3. See <http://www.coac.org.my>

COMMENT:	Indigenous Peoples in the Popular Consciousness
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Notions of ‘savagery’ and ‘wildness’ have long been used by states as rhetorical devices with which to prop up ‘civilisation’ and justify the conquest of ‘others’. The powerful and complex role of the ‘savage’ in the narrative of the nation-state is reflected in the interplay between two, apparently contradictory, idealised images of the primitive: the ‘wild savage’ (often portrayed as irrational, brutish, violent, treacherous) and the ‘noble savage’ (wise, gentle, innocent). Many scholars have described how these two dimensions of the primitive mirror the historical contradictions of modernity. The image of the wild savage assures our moral and political superiority, affirming the imperative of progress and justifying our conquests—physical, economic and moral. The image of the ‘noble’ savage, in contrast, appeals to a different yet related set of deep-seated feelings lying within our collective unconscious; notably the nostalgia and anxiety that are part and parcel of our modern alienation and disaffection. Primitives may be amoral, but they are also innocent; they may be stuck in the past, but they are also authentic.

This complex interplay of complementary essentialisations is particularly evident in today’s world of ‘time-space compression’ and of market

intrusion into all corners of the world and spheres of human experience. Those of us who live and work in the frontiers of the expanding global economy often witness the subjugation and marginalisation of indigenous people through the language of the ‘wild savage’ and its three deadly sins; ignorance, laziness and backwardness. Oddly, however, these accusations are often accompanied by a familiar echo; the promise of salvation by the ‘noble savage’. It is thus, disconcerting to see how indigenous peoples, victimised in certain contexts and by certain people, are simultaneously presented—if not sold—in other contexts as keepers of knowledge and traditions that promise to save us from the mess in which we have gotten our modern spirits, minds, bodies and planet into.

These essentialised and distorted notions of the primitive, as culprits or saviours, rob indigenous peoples and societies of their agency, history and humanity. They do this in many ways. One is by questioning the authenticity or legitimacy of indigenous peoples or their claims on the basis that they have ‘changed their ways’. While we expect and demand that the ‘wild savages’ become civilised—that is, they become more like us—we lament when the ‘noble savages’ do the same. Indigenous people may be criticised one moment for being backwards and for resisting progress, and the next for allowing themselves to be corrupted by modernity and for becoming ‘acculturated’. Thus, part of learning and respecting each other—including ‘others’ such as the Orang Asli—is not to do so on the basis of how different or similar they are to us, but also on the basis of the fact that they are human and hence, necessarily and simultaneously similar, different and changing. We must thus, learn to see and value ‘others’ not as essentialised and inverted projections of our inner selves, but as humans and active subjects with whom we often share particular, often complex and troubled, histories and destinies.¹

Note

1. For further reading, see for example, Stuart Kirsch (1997) ‘Lost Tribes: Indigenous People and the Social Imaginary’, in *Anthropological Quarterly* Vol. 70, No. 2, pp. 58–67; Adam Kuper (2005) *The Reinvention of Primitive Society*; or Marianna Torgovnick (1991) *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*.