

The Dynamics of External Power and the Response of the Temiar Indigenous Community in Gua Musang, Kelantan: An Ethnographic Study

*Nina Khairil, Hafis Simin, Nik Nur Azizah Nik Halman, Iman Saadom, Azfar Amirawa, Naqeeudin Roslan, Roslieza Rosli

Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email

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ABSTRACT

Traditional leadership remains central to the Temiar Indigenous community in Kelantan, serving as a cornerstone for preserving customs, ancestral land and social harmony. Yet, modernization and external development pressures have raised serious concerns about the institution's survival. This study questions whether current development policies genuinely reflect Indigenous voices and sociocultural structures or whether they attempt to fit these communities into unfamiliar frameworks. Through a qualitative ethnographic approach, the research draws on focused interviews and observations of community headmen to explore how traditional leadership is adapting or struggling in this changing landscape. Thematic analysis highlights key issues: the evolving role of leadership, internal conflicts, the strategies adopted by leaders and the foundational demands of the Orang Asli. A major finding is the lack of reciprocal dialogue between local leadership structures and development agencies, which has deepened the disconnect and eroded grassroots authority. The study underscores the need for policymakers, NGOs and development practitioners to recognize and reintegrate traditional institutions into a more inclusive rural development framework. Empowering traditional leadership could provide a vital bridge between Indigenous values and national development goals.

Keyword: Non-Governmental Organization, Government Agencies, Orang Asli Temiar, Modernization, Foreign Powers

INTRODUCTION

The Orang Asli, an indigenous group in Malaysia, live across Peninsular Malaysia, excluding Penang and Perlis. The largest populations of Orang Asli are located in the states of Pahang, Perak, Selangor, and Kelantan. According to 2022 data from the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), the Orang Asli population in Malaysia totals about 209,575 individuals. Pahang has the highest concentration with 78,615 people, followed by Perak with 61,225, Selangor with 20,961, and Kelantan with 17,487.

This study specifically focuses on the Temiar community, which is part of the Senoi ethnic group. The Temiar are the largest Orang Asli group in Kelantan, with 15,237 members out of the total 17,487 Orang Asli in the state (JAKOA, 2022). The population breakdown of Orang Asli in Kelantan is shown in the table below.

Table 1 Indigenous Population in the State of Kelantan

No.	Ethnic Group	Population Total
1	Jakun	37
2	Temuan	36

3	Bateq	789
4	Jahai	715
5	Kensiu	4
6	Kintak	1
7	Mendriq	523
8	Jahut	1
9	Mahmeri	3
10	Semai	134
11	Semoq Beri	7
12	Temiar	15,237
Total		17,487

Source: Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA), 2022

Gua Musang has become one of the key locations that reflects the clear intersection between the traditional Temiar community and various external entities. The presence of private companies developing commercial plantations, the designation of development areas by the state government with minimal direct involvement of the community's voices, and the involvement of NGOs advocating for religious and social agendas have all contributed to the creation of a complex landscape of external power in the daily lives of the community. The SUHAKAM (2013) report highlights that many projects on Orang Asli land still do not adhere to the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), despite this being a fundamental principle to ensure that communities are fairly involved in any decisions regarding their land.

Despite various forms of assistance that have been provided, there remains a significant gap between the actual needs of the community and the implementation of policies at the agency level. Support from JAKOA, the Malaysian Rubber Board (LGM), RISDA, and KESEDAR has indeed been channelled, particularly in the form of agricultural, housing, and basic infrastructure support. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is often limited. This is due to unclear land status and the absence of centralized coordination in field implementation. According to an Astro Awani report (2024), the government has allocated nearly RM3 million for the development of the Orang Asli community in the Nenggiri state constituency, including RM1.6 million for agriculture and basic facilities. However, the extent to which these allocations truly impact the daily lives of the community still depends on the land designation process and the alignment of project implementation with the real needs of the local community.

The involvement of NGOs has sparked various reactions within the community. Some view it as support for the struggle for land rights, while others disagree when NGO representatives act without consulting legitimate leaders or the community's structure. When the existing structure is respected and involved, development efforts are more easily accepted by the community (Hafis, Ramle & Asmawi, 2015). However, despite their voices being frequently mentioned in external demands, the actual perspectives of the community are still rarely given space in policy formulation and project implementation.

Therefore, this study is conducted to delve deeper into the forms of external intervention within the Temiar community in Gua Musang and how the community perceives the presence of aid, advocacy, and outside influences in their region. The study aims to contribute to a more balanced understanding of the realities faced by the community at the grassroots level. It is also hoped that this research will serve as a valuable reference

for policymakers, activists, and implementing agencies in designing more inclusive development approaches that respect and honor local cultural structures.

METHOD

An ethnographic approach was used throughout the fieldwork, with data collected from several villagers, including leaders such as the Tok Batin, Tok Penghulu, and other residents. This approach allowed the researcher to obtain firsthand information directly from the participants. The researcher spent approximately one month with the informants to understand issues related to land dispute claims in the state of Kelantan.

The study involved six informants, labeled (IR1, IR2, IR3, IR4, IR5, IR6). During the course of the study, information was gathered through interviews and participant observation. Additionally, the researcher employed documentary research methods, using various documents related to the issues being studied to enhance the existing information. Loose documents were also used to illustrate the data collection process and served as references throughout the research.

In this study, the information gathered was analyzed using NVivo 12 software. The use of this software greatly assisted the researcher in managing and categorizing data according to specific characteristics, especially when the data was analyzed based on themes set through the Thematic Analysis approach. The interview questions were conducted in the Kelantan dialect, as all informants spoke in this dialect. This approach not only facilitated communication but also created a more comfortable and open atmosphere between the researcher and the respondents. Overall, the findings of the study became more convincing when the data was analyzed thoroughly and presented clearly, in detail, and in an easily understandable manner.

Assistance from JAKOA and Government Agencies

Government agencies such as the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), RISDA, the Malaysian Rubber Board, and KESEDAR are indeed seen as playing a significant role in providing various forms of development assistance to the Temiar community in Gua Musang. This aid covers various aspects of life, such as support in agriculture, housing construction, economic input provision, and social coordination aimed at improving the community's overall well-being. However, despite these initiatives showing the government's commitment to empowering the Orang Asli community, the level of acceptance and the actual impact of these aid implementations are not uniform.

Some members of the community welcome the support provided, especially when the aid reaches them directly and benefits their daily lives. However, there are also those who express dissatisfaction with the implementation, which is sometimes seen as delayed, inconsistent, or hindered due to administrative structure issues and conflicts related to land ownership rights. This highlights that, although physical aid is provided, community acceptance still depends on how well it aligns with their real-life circumstances and local needs.

For example, the Orang Asli Housing Assistance Program (PBROA) has allocated RM3.8 million since 2021, including the construction of 16 housing units in Gua Musang in 2024, with a cost of RM66,000 per unit (BERNAMA, 2024). In the economic context, the government has also allocated nearly RM3 million for the socioeconomic development of the Orang Asli community in the Nenggiri state constituency, including RM1.6 million for agricultural inputs, plantation road construction, and the provision of basic social facilities (Astro Awani, 2024). This allocation indirectly reflects the structured efforts undertaken by the government to ensure the sustainability of the Temiar community in rural areas.

The community also acknowledges that the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) has implemented several large-scale projects, particularly in agriculture, that have had a direct impact on their lives. One informant (IR1) explained that the support received included the provision of seeds, fertilizers, and various necessary farming tools:

“Ketika itu JAKOA dia buat satu projek besar juga. Dia buat, dia bekal benih, bekal baja. Dia bekal semua peralatan.” (IR1)

These contributions have helped some members of the community start small-scale rubber planting, although on a limited scale. Additionally, agencies like KESEDAR have collaborated in efforts to implement agricultural projects by involving active participation from the village residents. However, according to another informant (IR2), failure still occurred despite the community's commitment to the work:

“Kita dah join dengan KESEDAR... kita bagi dia nak usahakan, kita sendiri yang kerja dalam. Tak berjaya juga.” (IR2)

Some of the projects planned in collaboration with the Malaysian Rubber Board also faced setbacks. Informant (IR1) mentioned:

“LGM beri peruntukan khas... sehingga sekarang dia tak jadi juga. Kesnya masalah tanah juga... dia bertindih dengan peneroka, dengan syarikat. Mereka takut akan timbul konflik” (IR1)

In many cases, issues such as overlapping land areas and the lack of official land ownership titles have become major challenges that slow down the implementation of large-scale economic programs. This complicates administrative and planning processes because the land status cannot be verified through official documents. At the same time, the community has expressed concerns about the lack of feedback from the relevant authorities, reflecting the need to strengthen two-way communication to ensure that every initiative planned is more inclusive and aligns with the community's real needs. One village leader (IR2) stated:

“Lepas tu, dia minta nak bincang semula dengan pihak JAKOA tapi JAKOA pun tak beri respons.” (IR2)

Despite the various challenges faced in the implementation of development programs, there have also been positive efforts shown by the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), particularly in coordinating aid during disasters. During the Northeast Monsoon (MTL) season, JAKOA was appointed as the main coordinating agency for all forms of assistance provided to the Orang Asli community in Gua Musang. This appointment aimed to prevent overlapping functions between government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in disaster management (BERNAMA, 2023). This role reflects JAKOA's commitment to ensuring that aid is delivered systematically through organized official channels.

Overall, the Temiar community appreciates the government's assistance, but they expect a more consistent delivery without bureaucratic obstacles or issues related to land status. They also emphasize that every plan should align with the realities of their daily lives and existing social structures. Aid that is implemented collaboratively without external disruptions is seen as more effective in ensuring the long-term well-being of the community.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and External Agencies

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in advocating for the rights and welfare of the Orang Asli community is often a significant part of the discourse surrounding inclusive development. In Gua Musang, the presence of NGOs among the Temiar community is associated with various advocacy efforts concerning land issues, heritage, and social welfare. However, the community's acceptance of NGO involvement is not always positive. There is skepticism regarding the approaches of some NGOs, which are alleged to bypass local leadership structures, leading to tensions from social and cultural perspectives. According to some informants, entering villages without the knowledge of the Tok Penghulu (village chief) and the Orang Asli Village Development and Security Committee (JPKKOA) is seen as a violation of community structure. As stated by one leader (IR1):

“Isu ni, saya pun tahu senyap-senyap. Dia tak refer Tok Penghulu. Ini pun tak pernah jumpa saya.” (IR1)

Situations like this have also been recorded in the SUHAKAM report, which emphasizes the importance of respecting the leadership of the Orang Asli community in any form of external involvement, to ensure that aid is not misinterpreted and is aligned with local values (SUHAKAM, 2013).

Additionally, there have been complaints within the community that NGO actions in pushing for land claims have resulted in unintended social consequences. Some residents have reported tensions in relationships among themselves, particularly when external influences trigger internal divisions. A study by Nina Khairil et al. (2025) also indicates that external intervention, carried out without consultation with the community, has led to tension and discomfort among the residents. One informant (IR4) stated:

“Daripada orang kampung baik-baik, sama-sama ni. Sekarang kami bergaduh sama bergaduh.” (IR4)

More concerning, there are allegations that some NGOs are using material promises as a way to encourage community support for their movement. As shared by a leader (IR2):

“Pasal dijanji oleh NGO tu macam-macam. Ada yang besok awak boleh senang, dia masuk duit dalam akaun anda semua, bantuan kepada awak semua – setiap bulan. Dia cuba pengaruh.” (IR2)

This situation raises questions about the extent to which external advocacy approaches truly consider the internal dynamics and social balance within the Temiar community itself. It also raises doubts regarding the transparency and ethics of some NGOs in their approach to indigenous communities. While NGO efforts are often seen as catalysts for raising awareness of rights and providing alternative assistance, incomplete and opaque approaches have the potential to weaken internal unity within the Temiar community. According to Amnesty International (2018), there was a case in Gua Musang where activists assisting the Orang Asli in defending their ancestral land faced pressure, including legal actions and threats. Although NGO efforts are viewed as courageous and well-intentioned, within the community itself, the approach taken may not always align with the desires of the residents, what they prioritize, or the long-established social order they follow.

Concerns also arise when NGOs come into the community under the pretext of offering assistance, yet at the same time, they are reported to carry their own agenda, which includes the spread of religious teachings. This has created discomfort among the residents, especially when the approach used does not involve local leaders or is not done openly. An informant (IR3) stated:

“NGO daripada penganut Kristian banyak menjalankan program di Kampung Kelaik tapi tak pernah melaksanakannya di kampung lain dalam pos kami. Mereka juga tidak berjumpa dengan Penghulu atau penduduk di sini.” (IR3)

The lack of direct interaction with local leaders or the village community makes the efforts carried out difficult to understand and accept. Moreover, there is a perception among the residents that some NGOs are only active at the initial stage and fail to continue their involvement consistently. This action creates skepticism within the community about the true dedication to advocating for the welfare of the Temiar Orang Asli. As shared by a village leader IR1:

“Dia macam jaringan ni, NGO ni dia masuk kampung Asli, dia ajar lepastu hasut orang Asli suruh buat ni, buat tu. Lepas tu dia tinggal.” (IR1)

This experience provides an illustration that although the involvement of NGOs has the potential to bring about positive outcomes, an approach that is not sensitive to local structures and cultural values can create a trust gap between them.

Overall, these findings suggest that the role of NGOs within the Temiar community in Gua Musang should be evaluated more critically. While the aid and advocacy provided play a crucial role, the approach adopted must be more transparent, respectful of the existing social structure, and not add additional burden to the community through unnecessary internal conflicts. Actions that are not grounded in cultural sensitivity, respect for traditional authority, and local aspirations not only disrupt community harmony, but can also have long-term effects on social cohesion and the direction of the community's struggle.

Representation Confusion and Social Impact Within the Community

In the context of the Temiar Orang Asli community in Gua Musang, the issue of confusion regarding who represents the voice of the community often becomes one of the main challenges, especially in matters concerning land rights, development, and negotiations with external parties. The absence of clear references to legitimate leadership structures, such as Tok Batin, Penghulu, and the Orang Asli Development and Security Committee (JPKKOA), has led some external parties, including NGOs and activists, to act or make claims on behalf of the community without going through proper processes. This situation not only raises questions about the legitimacy of such actions but also triggers internal tensions between residents with differing viewpoints.

Findings from interviews indicate that some land claims movements and the implementation of external projects did not involve the village's legitimate leaders. One informant explained (IR4),

“Penglibatan tu berlaku tanpa pengetahuan kami. Tiada siapa datang beritahu, Tok Penghulu pun langsung tak dimaklumkan.” (IR4)

This situation demonstrates that an external party is acting unilaterally, without consulting or seeking permission from the community's leadership structure. Furthermore, the use of the village's name in the external claim has caused unease among the residents (IR5).

“Dia guna nama orang Blau” (IR5)

According to another informant, this refers to the actions of a particular NGO using the village's name in land claim documents without any notification or consultation with the residents or village leaders.

The impact of this confusion has also been felt in the community's social structure, which is increasingly strained. Several informants stated that family relationships became tense due to the issue of representation and land claims that were too large and not thoroughly discussed. As stated by one informant:

“Tuntutan yang mereka buat bukan ikut kira, bukan ikut keluarga. Minta sampai 9000 hektar.” (IR5)

“Daripada orang kampung baik-baik, sama-sama ni, bergaduh sama bergaduh.” (IR6)

The claims made without considering the voices of all parties involved have caused suspicion and division between those who support the NGO's actions and those who choose to remain loyal to the original community structure.

However, within the Temiar community itself, there are still rational and cautious voices in evaluating the situation. Not everyone supports a confrontational approach or large-scale claims. One informant (IR5) offered a more practical and open-minded solution:

“Sekiranya kalau dia lulus separuh-separuh pun, kita terima. Untuk kemudahan kita satu kawasan. Itu yang saya cadang.” (IR5)

This viewpoint reflects the desire of certain leaders who are more inclined towards a negotiated and gradual solution, considering current needs without disregarding the existing leadership structure. For them, stability and daily welfare are more important than large-scale claims whose outcomes are uncertain and risky, potentially creating tension within the community. This approach is seen as more realistic and capable of opening space for a more inclusive and consensus-based process.

Expectations of the Temiar Community

In facing pressure related to land issues, encroachment, and external intervention, the Temiar community in Gua Musang has consistently voiced the hope that a solution be reached gradually, legally, and harmoniously. Feedback from the residents themselves indicates that they prioritize negotiation, open dialogue, and the use of existing legal channels.

At the same time, the community disagrees with harsh approaches such as street demonstrations, roadblocks, or any form of resistance involving violence. Such actions are seen as inconsistent with the community's core values, which prioritize peace and internal well-being. One informant (IR4) emphasized:

“Tidurlah dekat jalan tengah, buat bangsal, demonstrasi, menyempit. Kita kena melalui undang-undang yang sedia ada. Perundangan. Bincang-bincang secara harmoni.” (IR4)

The residents also stated that any efforts to resolve land issues should directly involve the community's leadership structure. Open and transparent negotiations are seen as crucial so that the voices at the grassroots level can be formally raised and respected. One informant (IR3) stated:

“Kita pun... melainkan mereka panggil kita berunding. Dia okey lah. Kita cuba cadangkan. Nak pandangan kita – begini.” (IR3)

This voice reflects the maturity of the community in dealing with external parties, as well as their hope to be recognized as the legitimate voice in any negotiation process and policy implementation involving their land and living areas.

The issue of land encroachment was also raised by the residents, with the hope that government agencies would take legal action against those who trespass on the village's land. They do not want this matter to persist, fearing it will disturb the community's well-being. One informant (IR6) stated:

“Mengharapkannya... mana-mana peneroka yang melibat, ataupun merapat, menceroboh kawasan penempatan Orang Asli, minta mereka ni dibawa keluar.” (IR6)

Overall, the findings show that the Temiar community in Gua Musang is clear about what they expect: a structured, gradual solution that respects village leadership and follows legitimate channels. They not only reject external influences that divide, but are also open to accepting practical solutions as long as they are implemented transparently and consider the community's structure. For them, negotiation and discussion are more important than pressure or actions that could disrupt the existing harmony.

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