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Alberto Gomes
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Alter-Native ‘Development’: indigenous forms of social ecology

ALBERTO GOMES

ABSTRACT  The goal of this article is to outline an indigenous form of social ecology offered as an alternative development model. Based on the normative system of the Orang Asli (Malaysian Aborigines), this model is characterised by various social, cultural and ecological ideas and practices undergirding the interconnected conditions of equality, sustainability and peace, which engenders a better life for all within the community. I contend that this model will provide lessons on how we might develop a normative paradigm to serve as an alternative to the current ecological and socially unsustainable mainstream and neoliberal development policy and practice, obsessed with the attainment of economic growth and greater market integration.

The quest for an alternative to the purportedly destructive and exploitative development based on a capitalist or neoliberal focus on economic growth and market integration has a long history. One such recent effort is the de-growth theory associated with the work of several European economists such as Serge Latouche and Joan Martinez-Alier. While the de-growth theory, which has inspired a growing intellectual movement in France, Italy and Spain, has indeed produced an interesting stream of scholarly work in the right direction, it lacks, like Herman Daly’s steady-state economics, a clear path as to how the lofty ideals of voluntary simplicity and downscaling can be realised. Furthermore, it falls short of providing a blueprint for social reorganisation to accompany economic and ecological transformation. Somewhat more promising is the ‘reinventing social emancipation’ project directed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos which has brought together a team of scholars in an effort to counter neoliberal globalisation and define and delineate alternative forms of globalisation. Sharing similar ethics and vision is the ‘human economy’ project associated with Keith Hart, Jean-Louis Laville and Antonio David Cattani.

As all these recent intellectual interventions emphasise, the pressing problems confronting humanity at large, be they poverty, social inequality, collective violence, climate change and the recent financial collapse, demand a rethinking and restructuring of the current normative order. In their critical
assessment of current neoliberal development models Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick rightly contend that ‘the future existence of the world’s people depends on breaking this utterly deficient style of developmental thought’. Furthermore, they note that ‘while utopian thinking has a role to play in outlining the great alternatives in their purest, most contrasting forms, such debate must draw on practical experience’. This article in a way answers their exhortation by offering such a ‘practical experience’. Drawing from my longstanding ethnographic work spanning more than three decades on the Orang Asli, Malaysia’s Aborigines, my goal in this article is to outline a holistic model of an indigenous social ecology, which I contend represents a radical shift from the growth-fetish economism of mainstream development to an ecological imagination that can bring about real sustainability. The irony is that this time-honoured Orang Asli model, which, as I will show, has much to offer in reforming mainstream development, has been grossly undermined or demolished by state-sponsored development and its attendant process of commoditisation in many Orang Asli villages in the past several decades.

Anthropologists have for a very long time offered alternative models of social life drawn from their studies of indigenous communities that maintain sustainable social and ecological life ways. While a ‘return to the native’ or seeking ‘tribal wisdom’ may run the risk of being dismissed or derided as romanticist or utopian idealism, I argue that particular aspects of indigenous social life are of immense epistemological value for rethinking and reformulating development policies and economic models from one that negatively impacts on humanity and nature to one that can lead to a better life for all. Such policies and models would obviously need to be appropriately modified or adapted to suit the social scale and population size and density of ‘modern’ social life. It must be emphasised, however, that the ‘lessons from the margins’ are not meant to be simply normatively prescriptive; they also shed light on the proximate causes of the problems that confront modern societies and humanity at large. They offer, in other words, a critique of modes of living that bring about and reproduce poverty, inequality, violence and ecological degradation. Let me elaborate on this point: for a deeper and fuller understanding as to why inequality exists, it is necessary in my view to appreciate how communities are able to maintain egalitarianism. In order to avoid or avert conflict which could lead to collective violence, it is important to make sense of how people are able to live peacefully with one another. A growth-focused economy undermines egalitarianism and peaceability through what I have labelled the 4-G (Growth, Glut, Greed and Grievance) syndrome. I think it is worth elaborating this syndrome, albeit in a truncated version for space considerations.

It almost goes without saying that we live in a world currently obsessed with economic growth. Governments are evaluated on the basis of how well they have done to facilitate a growing economy, measured by the gross domestic product (GDP), that is, the total amount of goods and services produced in a country. As the economic mantra goes, GDP growth will lead to
increased national wealth which, reciprocally, through the trickledown effect, will eliminate poverty. And this in turn will effect an aversion of grievance. In reality, and paradoxically, a different scenario has materialised. Growth mania has led to the production of much more goods and services than necessary for an economy or society to survive or thrive, resulting concomitantly in a glut of products. It has also led to an accumulative tendency, triggering the prevalence of greed; a scenario where producers are driven to expand supply of commodities to maximise profits and, through consumerism, purchasers of these commodities in no time often feel or are made to feel unsatisfied with what they have bought, and yearn for more. The cycle of production and consumption functions to sustain surplus accumulation. There is insurmountable evidence that, in the process of capitalist expansion and heightened consumerism, many marginalised people and communities have been aggrieved as a consequence of being exploited, excluded, discriminated, displaced and dispossessed. To put it dialectically, the greed of some leads to the grievance of many and, as numerous studies have suggested, greed and grievance are two key factors underlying the outbreak and persistence of violent conflict in several parts of the world.

How might we break away from this syndrome? From the Club of Rome’s Limits to Growth and Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful in the 1970s to Herman Daly’s ‘steady state’ economics to the more recent de-growth models of voluntary simplicity, we have been offered a range of proposals, such as the need to downscale production and consumption and/or the shift away from a growth-focused economics to an ecologically friendly ‘sustainable development’ or ecological economics or Buddhist economics of frugality. While it is without any doubt that these are indeed desirable aspirations, I would maintain that what is required is a new imaginary, one that goes beyond economics and is firmly grounded in a social ecology that disrupts the human–nature dichotomy. As Fikret Berkes has eloquently stated, what is required is ‘a new philosophy that recognizes ecological limits and the unity of humans and nature and strives to satisfy social as well as economic needs’. I will turn to outlining the broad contours of such an ecological imagination.

Alter-Native social ecology

In terms of cultural values and worldviews the model I am advocating is one that is inspired by the aspirations and expressions of the native—indigenous communities, marginalised peoples, and the disadvantaged, particularly communities that adhere to an egalitarian ethos, sustainable living and peaceability. Such communities are typically in touch with each other and with nature, concomitantly averting social and ecological alienation, a growing phenomenon in the developed world. Learning from them will help to rediscover the interconnectedness of life and shift our focus from the abstract to the sensuous, sentimental and emotional aspects of social life. Drawing from and informed by the rich anthropological lessons from the Orang Asli village, I contend that an Alter-Native social ecology must be
predicated on the normative principles and moral ideals of equality, sustainability and peace (ESP) (see Figure 1).

As I will outline in the pages that follow, in these communities equality, sustainability and peace, rather than existing as three separate cultural ideals or attributes, are intertwined and interconnected. I argue that it is precisely these aspects of social life that have permitted such communities to achieve a ‘better life’. In a nutshell, my contention goes as follows: striving for equality will help eradicate poverty as it has been observed that people are poor because they have unequal access to food and resources to which they are entitled. Poverty, I argue, is simply inequality materialised. As I have mentioned above, people treated unequally and/or who are socially excluded are often resentful and feel aggrieved and this has been a cause of conflict and collective violence, usually by the states and dominant groups in their attempts to crush peaceful protests and demonstrations. It is also difficult, if not impossible, to live sustainably, both socially and ecologically, under conditions of poverty and inequality. Hence, striving for equality will nurture ecological and social sustainability and foster peace. I believe that peace, which is commonly defined as the absence of violence, is the norm in human life and collective violence the aberration. To maintain and restore peaceful coexistence and communal cohesion in the world today, we need to learn from people who have developed cultures that avert and avoid conflict. In such cultures people are socially inclusive, adhere to a non-violent ethos, maintain civil interactions with other people, treat fellow humans and nature with dignity and respect, promote the celebration of cultural diversity, and uphold the principles of social justice and equality. I will now turn to a discussion of equality, sustainability and peaceability among the Orang Asli.

Equality

There are at least three aspects of Orang Asli social life that serve to maintain intra-community egalitarian ethos and habitus. First, they adhere to a political system that is socially inclusive and truly democratic. Power is

![Figure 1. The ESP model.](image)
communally controlled and does not rest in the hands of one or a few individuals or a group. Second, Orang Asli engage in intensive intra-group sharing and generalised reciprocity that works to grant, albeit indirectly, equal access to everyone in the village to its resources, as well as functioning as a levelling mechanism to balance off inequities in production or opportunities for production. Third, Orang Asli traditionally subscribe to a communal-based property ownership system that hinders monopoly or control of resources in the hands of any individual or group. I begin with the political system.

Orang Asli communities are not acephalous; some sort of system of village leadership or headmanship is found in most communities. However, people have more or less equal access to power or means of coercion. As a form of deliberative democracy, most village decisions are made consensually and an attempt by any member of the village to dominate or coerce fellow villagers is invariably scorned and treated with contempt, and thus strongly discouraged. People generally abhor aggrandising behaviour from fellow villagers and will vote with their feet in the face of coercion. Furthermore, Corry van der Sluys notes that, among the group of Orang Asli she researched, people strongly believe that forcing someone to do one’s bidding will raise ‘hot’ emotions and in the process weaken the person’s ruway (soul), causing him or her to fall ill or even die.19 Maintaining social cohesion is of paramount importance to Orang Asli and people are fully cognisant of the disruptive potentialities on such cohesion of aggrandising and belligerent behaviour. This is in stark contrast with the competitive ‘go getter’ social personhood that a growth-focus development or neoliberal capitalism encourages, stimulates or rewards.

Social cohesion among the Orang Asli is also reinforced through intra-community interdependence and one of the ways they do this is through sharing and reciprocal obligations with fellow members of the community or village. Furthermore, as several anthropologists have maintained, sharing helps to buttress egalitarianism as it serves through its levelling mechanism to hinder accumulation and reciprocally operates to thwart or retard the development of inequalities of wealth, power and prestige.20 During my field research among the Orang Asli, I have observed people giving food and other goods from their traditional subsistence-oriented foraging as well as from the shops to one another on a regular basis.21 Governed by the principle of generalised reciprocity, a donor does not expect to receive a return gift from his or her recipient. Instead the donor’s generosity is likely to be reciprocated by someone else in the group of people involved in reciprocal exchanges. In generalised reciprocity sharing occurs within a group of people and the obligations to make a return gift are shared by the members of the group. It is abundantly clear that Orang Asli accord a great deal of importance to sharing, which appears to be strongly advocated for moral reasons and not just plainly economic. Young children are socialised to share their food and belongings with their neighbours; selfish people are often subjected to ridicule and malicious gossip.

It is worth noting that sharing and the interdependence that it fosters do not come in the way of the expression of individual autonomy among the
Orang Asli. This adherence to autonomy, as Dentan indicates, ‘precludes
long term commitments and thus maximizes flexibility in social groupings, so
that access to territory is open to any people who hang around long enough,
whatever their ethnic identity or linguistic affiliation’.22 Being autonomous
individually in this sense is not synonymous with the kind of methodological
individualism propagated by neoclassical or neoliberal economics. Orang
Asli in their social conduct are not driven by individual economic rationalism
epitomised by the ‘what’s in it for me’ attitude or the profit motive of ‘trying
to gain the most out of an action or interaction’ that most mainstream
development promotes.

In respect to access to and ownership of property Orang Asli adhere to a
communal system of ownership. As in the case of intentional communities in
the West, such as co-housing or eco-villages,23 everyone in a village has equal
access and rights to the land and its resources. As an ethnographic case, I will
elaborate the traditional system of land ‘ownership’ among the Semai, one of
the Orang Asli indigenous groups I have researched. Semai traditionally
share control and ownership over the village territory (ngrii’). Demarcated by
streams and ridges, the territory is usually named after the main river of its
drainage system. Semai are permitted to hunt, gather, fish, collect forest
products, and cultivate crops in their ngrii’ but do not have exclusive rights to
land unless it is a swidden that they cleared and are still using. In other
words, individual Semai have rights in common with their fellow villagers.
What is particularly interesting is that ownership does not rest solely or fully
in human hands. For Semai and other Orang Asli, humans do not have
dominion over land or nature. They believe that control or ‘ownership’ of
land and natural resources rests on supernatural forces believed to inhabit
these spaces. In other words, people have usufruct, and not absolute,
individual rights to the land. I shall discuss this in the context of swidden
(‘slash and burn’) agricultural practice among the Semai.

Upon selecting a suitable plot for a swidden, Semai will clear a small area
of about one square metre in the middle of the site and then announce loudly
their intention to cultivate the area. Meant to be for the ground spirit (nyani
kawul) or spiritual guardian in control of the area, this announcement is an
indirect request for the spirit’s permission to use the land.24 The decision of
the spirit is believed to be revealed in the requestors’ dreams, which will be
subjected to interpretation for omens. Good omens mean that permission has
been granted. Once the ‘green light’ from the spirit is obtained, the swiddener
proceeds with cultivation but with great care and respect for the land. Semai
hold the view that practices leading to ecological degradation of the land will
attract the wrath of the spiritual custodian, which they believe will bestow
misfortune upon the perpetrators, such as crop failure and personal injury.

While it would be naïve to argue that such forms of land tenure could be
adhered to universally, let alone be appropriated as a system to replace what
is commonplace today, that is, the institution of private property, there are
several interesting aspects of underlying ideology (or principles) that could
provide moorings for a re-conceptualisation of the human–nature relation-
ship. Land, in indigenous conception, is ‘owned’ not by humans but by

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supernatural beings. People, then, are simply stewards of the land rather than owners. But they believe that they have to abide by the strict rules of nature in order to survive. An individual or family may use the land to swidden for one or two seasons. During this period the cultivators have exclusive rights to the plot and its harvest but once they cease to use the land it reverts to communal property, managed by the village but owned by the land spirit. However, the cultivators still retain ‘ownership’ of whatever fruit trees they have planted on the plot. There are at least two ecologically sound principles associated with usufruct rights. First, people do not hold more land than they can use. Second, it would be in the interest of cultivators to take good care of the land for their future use and for the use of future generations. Usufruct removes absolute rights to land from the individual and locates these rights in some supernatural force which serves to sanction ‘proper’ treatment of land and nature. In a recent paper highlighting the ecological virtues of Australian Aboriginal social and cultural life Wills-Johnson observes that, included among the characteristics associated with environmental sustainability are ‘diffuse power of control over resources’, ‘reciprocity’, and ‘relative equality in and indeed limited importance place upon material wealth’; this equally applies to the Orang Asli practice of environmental sustainability to which we now turn.25

Sustainability

Sustainability is one of the many buzzwords of our times. Like development it is a concept with a host of different definitions and meanings. Governments and organisations use the term sustainability in conjunction with their policies and programmes to make them appear ecologically sound or socially acceptable. Ever since the Brundtland Commission, which coupled development with sustainability to form the concept of sustainable development defined as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’,26 governments and development agencies have incorporated sustainability as a desired goal and outcome for development. However, the concept of sustainable development has been criticised as an oxymoron in light of the fact that the goals of sustainability and development, which are intimately linked to economic growth, are intrinsically contradictory.27 Keeping the critiques of the concept of sustainability in mind, I use the term sustainability here to refer to the capacity to endure or thrive within the natural limits in the sense of ecological sustainability as well as the capacity to maintain social lives and well-being *sui generis* in terms of social sustainability. To paraphrase the common definition of ‘sustainable development’, I would say that Orang Asli live sustainably by ensuring that whatever they do does not compromise their ability and the ability of future generations to live in harmony with nature and with one another.

Indigenous peoples are generally noted for their traditional ecological knowledges and practices that enable them to live sustainably with the natural environment. As the anthropologist, Susan Crate, observes,
Indigenous cultures, by nature, possess a relatively high capacity for adaptation to uncertainty and change due to both a generalist and time-tested knowledge of subsistence survival, and a propensity for innovation in the context of environmental, sociocultural, political, and economic change. She also notes that ‘for indigenous peoples, sustainability goes beyond mainstream sustainability parameters of protecting resources via self-government, land tenure and rights, comanagement, and self-determination’.

A key factor in ecological sustainability is how nature or the environment is perceived, conceived and represented. The relationship between the discourses on the environment and environmental practices is arguably uncomplicated: the way humans treat or interact with nature is intimately related to their conceptions and perceptions of nature. People are more likely to dominate over nature or transform their environment if they think of it as wild and useless. In contrast, people who have respect for the natural environment are more inclined to live in harmony with nature. In order to appreciate Orang Asli perceptions of the environment and how these then influence and direct their sustainable treatment of nature, I will focus on three aspects of Orang Asli ecological epistemologies: their philosophical connection with nature, their naturalised historical consciousness, and their spiritual articulation with nature.

In their philosophical connection with nature, Orang Asli subscribe to an eco-centric perspective, which is completely opposite to the modern capitalist anthropocentric view of the environment, where human needs and welfare take precedence over nature. Furthermore, unlike most, if not all, modern societies, Orang Asli are not alienated from nature. The differing perspectives on the forest are particularly instructive. Being forest fringe or forest dwellers, the natural environment of the Orang Asli is the tropical rainforest. While most Orang Asli today are rubber and oil palm smallholders, primarily as a consequence of government-sponsored development and resettlement programmes, in the past they have relied on the forests for most of their subsistence needs, obtained through hunting, gathering and swidden farming. They still engage, albeit intermittently, however, in their traditional economic activities, as well as collecting forest products for trade. The forests may not be economically as important to the Orang Asli today as before but the cultural significance of forests to the people appears to be unaltered.

Orang Asli generally perceive the forest as their parent and themselves as its children: it provides and cares for them and ‘killing’ the forest is tantamount to killing one’s parent. For the Batek, one of the Orang Asli ethnic sub-groups, Kirk Endicott found that forest–human relations are metaphorised in ritual and everyday discourse as an ‘adult–child caring’ with the forest as a parent to be treated with affection and gratitude for its nature’s ‘gifts’. This differs starkly from the traditional Western or modern view whereby, as Bird-David indicates:

nature and humankind have been ‘seen’ as detached and in opposition. Furthermore, they have been viewed within a ‘subject–object’ frame: nature
‘seen’ as a resource to be utilized, controlled, possessed, dominated, managed and (more recently) looked after by humankind.31

Such a view is long-standing in Western civilisation: from the Greek myths related to the fearsome Pan,32 the Lord of the Woods, to the many fairy tales (such as Hansel and Gretel and Red Riding Hood), the forest is the abode of dangerous beings, a dark, mysterious and foreboding place best avoided. In contrast, for Orang Asli, the forest is a supportive and friendly place.

Another distinctive aspect of Orang Asli epistemology is the way history is conceptualised. In my enquiries related to Orang Asli historical experiences, I focused on questions as to when events and incidents that my respondents talked about occurred. My respondents, however, narrated stories of the past in relation to where, rather than when, these ‘took place’. This sort of historical consciousness is apparently common among indigenous peoples. In his ethnographic research among the Illongot of the Philippines, Renato Rosaldo contended that the Illongot’s historical consciousness is spatialised rather than temporalised as in Western or modern historiography. He observes:

Stories usually are a series of relatively autonomous episodes that are united, like beads on a string, by winding thread of continuous movement through space, rather than by a rising plot line that points towards its own resolution in a climax. At their most elemental, Illongot stories may simply list a lifetime of place names where people have gardened or erected their houseposts. More elaborate stories, often about oratory, fishing, hunting, and headhunting, begin at home, move in gradual step-by-step fashion toward their destinations, and conclude with a quick return to the place of origin.33

Like the Illongot, for Orang Asli the ‘events’ in their history are inscribed in the landscape. Walking through the forest with Orang Asli was often also a ‘journey’ into their past. Orang Asli would point to particular sites or landmarks and then relate stories of past events that have taken place there. This spatialisation of history obviously gives more meaning to the environment. For Orang Asli, then, nature is not just a bearer of ‘resources’ but also an archive of people’s history. Space is historicised to become place-coded with symbolic and social meanings. Seen this way, one could say that the destruction of the forest that Orang Asli ‘own’ or the dislocation of the people from their homelands, as in the case of resettlement projects, is tantamount to an attempt to erase their history.

Apart from ‘nature as history’, for Orang Asli, as for many indigenous communities, ecological knowledge, rather than existing as a separate field of knowledge or embodied in a distinct ‘discipline’ as in Western science, is embedded in their cultural system. Anthropologists have long recognised and documented this ethnographic fact. In a classic example of such a study, Pigs for the Ancestors, Roy Rappaport found a close relationship between rituals and ecology among the Tsembaga Maring of New Guinea. He revealed how
ritual feasts among the Tsembaga functioned as a regulatory mechanism in maintaining balance in the ecological system.34

Like the Tsembaga, Orang Asli ecological knowledge and conceptions are embedded in their traditional religious systems, which can be described as ‘earthly’ in the sense that they connect people with nature. In all the different Orang Asli religious systems people believe in the existence of deities, spirits, elves and souls and all these in some way or the other are said to have ecological implications. As in the case of the ground dwelling spirit I discussed earlier, their spirits and deities demand that people live with nature rather than against nature. Another intriguing example of this is the Semai’s (one of the Orang Asli sub-groups) belief in the existence of a soul that they refer to as kenah senlook. This soul is part of the hunter and at the same time is intimately connected with the ‘laws’ of nature: respect for fellow creatures, taking only what you need, and the interconnectedness between humans, animals, spirits and the environment. Semai believe that breaking any of these ‘laws’, like treating game disrespectfully or killing more animals than needed for subsistence, will drive the kenah senlook away, leading to bad luck, mishap or misfortune. Kenah senlook, I would argue, is an idiom of nature that will express its wrath on humanity if the ‘laws’ of nature are disregarded or contravened.

The close nexus between religion and nature in indigenous communities stands in stark contrast to what has been referred to as a ‘sky-centred religion’.35 As Lynn White has argued, Judaeo-Christian theology:

established a dualism between man and nature and insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends...made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.36

I will now discuss the final aspect of the indigenous social ecology: peaceability.

Peaceability

Orang Asli are well known in anthropological circles as non-violent and non-intimidating in personal demeanour, as Robert Dentan observes:

Nonviolence is so salient in Aslian everyday life that all the ethnographers who have worked there—whatever their nationality, gender, theoretical biases, or original scientific ‘problem’—have wound up grappling with peaceability and its relationship with Aslian egalitarianism, ethnopsychology, and religious ideology.37

Orang Asli non-violence and peaceability are shaped by several of their social and cultural precepts and practices that I discussed above, namely egalitarianism, individual autonomy and social flexibility, and generalised reciprocity. To this I would add cooperation or, in the words of Peter Kropotkin, ‘mutual aid’.38 Sharing of material goods and labour creates a strong sense of interdependence and Orang Asli are fully aware of the fragility of such a social arrangement in the face of competition and conflict.
People will at all cost avoid any escalation of conflict and resort to a number of conflict resolution strategies, should a tiff or dispute arise. Among the Semai individuals or parties in conflict with one another over an issue are called to an adjudication referred to as *bicharaa*, where an elder or group of elders will invite the conflicting parties to express their case in turn. The *bicharaa* is attended by most people in the village, as well as relatives of the different parties from other villages, and whoever wishes to speak will be permitted to do so. The different views are presented in a mutually respectful and non-acrimonious manner. It appears that the purpose of the *bicharaa* is to allow all the parties in conflict to speak their mind but with the ultimate aim of resolving the issue in a peaceful manner. I would describe the *bicharaa* as a talkfest where there are so many speeches and debates that eventually everyone is all talked out. The adjudicators will then offer their opinions, where it is typical that both will be faulted. Fines may be imposed but these are usually small and rather insignificant. I have been told that the intention of the *bicharaa* is to seek a peaceful and socially undamaging solution to the issue and not to punish.

Orang Asli generally maintain peaceful relations with outsiders by resorting to one or another of several strategies. One effective tactic is flight or avoidance of contact with outsiders. As victims of slave raiders in the past and now as frequent targets for economic exploitation, Orang Asli are apparently aware that keeping a distance from outsiders, some of whom are likely to be dangerous, is a sensible way of surviving. Furthermore, walking away from a situation likely to cause a conflict is a sure way of preventing the situation escalating into a hostile confrontation, aggression or even violence. However, like the Paliyan in India, walking away for the Orang Asli is not interpreted as ‘backing down’ or ‘being submissive’ but ‘it is an unambiguous act of strength, strength in controlling oneself’.  

Orang Asli also behave civilly towards outsiders, a form of civility that I have labelled elsewhere as ‘sly civility’. Sly civility, according to Homi Bhabha, is a form of civility which conceals or evades the true feelings of a person to avoid reprisals, humiliation or oppression. Such a form of civility is often practised between people of unequal status. It is possible to discern three different forms of sly civility that Orang Asli adopt to maintain peaceful and harmonious relations with outsiders, namely, dissimulation, feigned ignorance, and bantering (‘joking relationship’). Orang Asli will typically pretend to concur with someone, usually a dominant other, or agree to undertake the bidding of that person in order to avoid discord, conflict or confrontation. Sometimes they will feign ignorance for the same reason. But bantering with potential opponents or antagonists or adversaries appears to the most common strategy among the Orang Asli in their quest to keep the peace with outsiders as well as within the community. One may question the morality of such hypocritical civility. However, I would argue that the value of such a strategy in maintaining peace or preventing the outbreak of violence must override its perceived lack or absence of morality.
Conclusion

More than 30 years ago the distinguished Indian scholar Rajni Kothari called for a search for

an alternative concept of both development and technology as well as of lifestyles, so as to ensure diversity in consonance with local resource endowments (human, material and technical), foster self-reliance and autonomy, and promote equity and participation, not only in economic and political processes, but also in giving meaning and content to human dignity at various levels. 41

In a more recent publication Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick proposed an alternative perspective of ‘development’ guided by a ‘radical democracy’ that is ‘fundamentally characterized by cooperative effort among equal partners, equal in that all expend most of their lifetime working to satisfy needs and remaking humankind’. 42 What I have outlined of the Orang Asli social ecology in this paper ticks all the boxes as far as the alternative development proposals presented in the development studies literature are concerned.

The question is whether such forms of indigenous social ecology can be introduced into the modes of living in ‘modern’ societies. It is worth noting that several of the normative principles of Orang Asli social lives are subscribed to by the many intentional communities, such as co-housing and eco-villages, that are mushrooming around the world but mostly in Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia. For example, the co-housing model, which was first developed in Denmark in the 1980s and which is now growing in popularity in the USA, is guided by six principles:

1. participation by residents in the functioning of the neighbourhood;
2. design of the neighbourhood by future residents;
3. shared common spaces and resources;
4. management of the neighbourhood by residents;
5. non-hierarchical decision making;
6. no shared economy. 43

A comparison of these principles with the Orang Asli village-based egalitarian ethos will reveal little difference. While combating social alienation is the key underlying intention of subscribers to the co-housing model, ecological sustainability appears to be the driving motivation in eco-villages. Such a lifestyle is apparently predominantly a middle-class phenomenon in relatively wealthy countries in the developed world. Furthermore, the intentional communities, like an Orang Asli village, involve small groups of 20 to 30 families. Can large urban centres be broken up into small intentional communities? It would appear impossible for this to happen, unless humanity is on the brink of total annihilation, as in the worst case scenario presented by climate change scientists.

What is possible, however, is a change of normative ideals and values drawing from the indigenous social ecology I have discussed in this article, not only in the way we live our lives but also in the reformulation of
development policies which, in their current forms are antithetical to the Indigenous model. What will need to be altered are several of the ideals, epistemes and values associated with neoliberal capitalism and mainstream developmental policies to ones manifested in the Indigenous ESP model. This will include a shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric perception of nature, from hyper-individualism to a community-focused responsibility, from a competitive outlook on everything to one that is focused on cooperation, sharing and altruism, and from a growth-fetish to a needs-based sustainable lifestyle. Here is where we can learn from the margins or peripheries or neglected epistemologies, as the anthropologist Henry Lewis, has argued in his research on Australian Aborigines: we must make a conscious effort ‘to learn from Aborigines rather than merely to learn about Aborigines’ in order to gain from the time-honoured and ecologically sound knowledge and conceptions of indigenous peoples.44

Notes

1 Quite a number of such alternative models have been co-opted into mainstream development through programmes such as human development, participatory development and sustainable development. There have also been attempts to indigenise development. However, as J Nederveen Pieterse, Development Theory: Deconstructions/Reconstructions, London: Sage, 2001, has rightly indicated, all these attempts have not led to a major paradigm shift in mainstream development. They have, in most cases, made mainstream development seem more palatable.


6 Ibid, p 282.

7 Orang Asli are often viewed as people living in a different time and on the peripheries of the modern world. This view has undergirded state-sponsored development projects explicitly aimed at bringing the benefits of modernity to the Orang Asli communities. Much of my research has focused on critical assessments of such development efforts. R Dentan, K Endicott, A Gomes & B Hooker, Malaysia and the Original People: A Case Study on the Impact of Development on Indigenous Peoples, Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1997; A Gomes, Looking for Money: Capitalism and Modernity in an Orang Asli Village, Subang Jaya, Malaysia/Melbourne: Center for Orang Asli Concerns/Trans Pacific Press, 2004; and A Gomes, Modernity and Malaysia: Settling the Menraq Forest Nomads, London: Routledge, 2007.

8 See, for example, M Sahlins, Stone Age Economics, Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1972. Sahlins coined the label ‘the original affluent society’ to refer to hunters and gatherers, on the basis that such groups were able to satisfy with ease all their wants with minimal amount of time allocated to work and without
suffering deprivation. It is worth noting that this work is listed as one of the sources of inspiration for the de-growth movement. See Martinez-Alier et al., ‘Sustainable de-growth’, p 1743.

9 As a normative reformulation of the concept of development, Peet & Hartwick suggest defining development as efforts directed towards ‘making a better life for everyone’. A better life is one where people are able to meet basic needs, that is ‘sufficient food to maintain good health; a safe, healthy place in which to live; affordable services available to everyone; and being treated with dignity and respect’. Peet & Hartwick, Theories of Development, p 1.

10 I have used my 4-G syndrome model as an analytical framework in a yet to be published article on collective violence.

11 Much has been said, especially in political economic literature, as to how the control of the means and relations of production leads to increased wealth and power in the hands of a few at the expense of many who are exploited and condemned to a lower stratum in a hierarchical class system. Striving to accumulate as much as possible has been linked to the purported innateness of greed among humans. Greed, I argue, is not an innate human quality as it is not a social fact in many cultures around the world, particularly cultures that value egalitarianism.


14 It must be stated that not all indigenous communities adhere to sound ecological principles. Many of these communities have adopted environmentally destructive practices primarily as a consequence of economic transformations, religious conversions and entanglements with modernity. The discursive risks of representing indigenous communities as ‘close to nature’ must be taken into consideration, as several scholars have considered such romanticised representations, or what Larry Lohman has labelled ‘Green orientalism’, to be politically hazardous, since the images have often been used to justify and legitimise ‘development’ that adversely affects such communities. See, for example, P Brosius, ‘Locations and representations: writing in the political present in Sarawak, East Malaysia’, Identities, 6(2–3), 1999, pp 345–386; and L Lohman, ‘Green orientalism’, 1993, at http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/green-orientalism, accessed 10 June, 2011.


17 See, for example, J Pim (ed), Nonkilling Societies, Hawaii: Center for Global Nonkilling, 2010.

18 For more information about such societies, see http://www.peacefulsocieties.org/.


24 This belief in the existence of the land spirit and the sort of practices associated with seeking permission are not unique to the Semai. Many Southeast Asian cultures have similar beliefs. See, for instance, P Kunstadter, Animism, Buddhism and Christianity: religion in the life of the Lua people of Pa Pae, north-western Thailand, in J McKinnon & W Bhrusarsi (eds), Highlanders of Thailand, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp 135–154. The Lua believe in the existence of the Lord of the Land and, like the Semai, regard swidden land as ‘a community resource, “belonging” to the spirits as a result of their long and continued occupancy, but to which the Lua villagers also have some claim because of their long-term residence. Swidden land is periodically (though temporarily) accessible to villagers through payment to the spirits’ (p 143).

29 Ibid, p 312.
32 In fact the English word ‘panic’, which means sudden, unreasoning, hysterical fear is derived from the name of this Greek god.
36 Quoted in *ibid*, p 14.

**Notes on contributor**

Alberto Gomes is a professor of anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, La Trobe University, Melbourne. His research is focused on Indigenous peoples and cultural politics in Malaysia and Goa, India. Among his key publications are *Malaysia and the ‘Original People’* (co-authored, 1997), *Looking for Money* (2004) and *Modernity and the Malaysian Aborigines* (2007).