



## Research Article

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# Framing the Actors through Thematic Structures: The Case of the Malaysian *Orang Asli*

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## Abstract

*The current study deals with the analysis of thematic structures in news articles published regarding the Orang Asli community in The Star. The study aims to investigate the major themes associated with the community when they are presented in media. An analysis was conducted on 158 news articles through the utilisation of van Dijk's "Theory of Semantic Macrostructures" (1980). Findings revealed that the community has been stereotypically represented as the most marginalised ethnic group in Malaysia with the highest poverty rates, experiencing poor health conditions, confronted horrendously with limited amenities, and facing limited access to political power. The findings provide a novel insight into the ways the Orang Asli community are represented in media and serves as a wake-up call for a more neutral representation of the community in media.*

**Keywords:** *Orang Asli, semantic macrostructure, indigenous community, news discourse, discrimination, ethnic minority*

## 1. Introduction

The mass media plays a central part in reproducing elements of discrimination in contemporary society as much as their role in the reproduction of modern societies (van Dijk, 1993). The powerful role played by the media also incorporates the function to shape the social cognition of society at large. In the field of ethnic affairs for example, the role played by the media in the cognitive, social and communicative process is essential as it is both ideological and also structural (Hall, 1982). The immediate effects of specific messages to specific audiences under specific circumstances of the media (especially news media) are significant, especially on the structures and contents of the social cognition of groups (van Dijk, 1993). In this vein, the news media has become the most important source of information and beliefs applicable in forming the interpretative framework for specific types of social and public relations, including those in the field of ethnic relations.

The media plays a central role in reproducing discrimination due to its relations with other elite institutions and because of the power they possess in structuring, shaping and changing the minds of the general public. In the scope of ethnic affairs for instance, the power of the media is exceptional due to the fact that large segments of the dominant communities (e.g. the white public) do not have access to information regarding ethnic affairs as they only possess few or no immediate experiences with members of the minority groups (van Dijk, 1987). Thus, the media faces no competition in their communicative functionalities with regard to ethnic affairs. Preferential media access and their social cognition authority on ethnic affairs may actually be influencing factors in their selection of topics, the choice of news actors, quotation patterns, style, prominence, the way the minorities are depicted and described, and also the overall features of the news article itself (Kneebone, 1985). Since the dominant groups are most likely to maintain their affluence, they will instead resort to representing the minorities in a negative manner, while at the same time contrasting with positive representations of their own selves. This symbolic polarisation, as how van Dijk (1993) perceives, is known as the division between 'us' and 'them,' and is an important theme in managing the ethnic consensus among the members of the public at large.

The last few decades have shown an increasing number of researches inspecting the projection of indigenous community in media (Bullimore, 1999; Collins & Reid, 2009; Mellor et al., 2009; Cho et al., 2012; Hussein, 2015; Chu and Huang, 2019). In the coverage of ethnic affairs, a collective of experiences and research by scholars unanimously portrayed evidence that media propagated stereotypical projection of and biasness toward indigenous community in various degrees and extents (Snorgrass and Wooty, 1985; van Dijk, 1989). According to Denis (1997), media constructs them in dualistic expressions such as "us vs. them, civilised vs. barbarian, modern vs. traditional, and individual rights vs. collective rights" (p.13).

Johnson (1987) conducted an analysis on the portrayal of the black people in the United States and found a significant lack of news reports that challenged ethnic stereotypes. News makers report news that aligned with their presumptions on the black community, labelling them as thieves, violent, unhygienic and drug pushers. The whites are instead presented as being more in control and powerful when they are portrayed alongside the blacks. In addition, the media often only cite the remarks of the whites on racial matters. The study concluded that the notion of 'discrimination' still remains a taboo and euphemistic terms like 'disadvantaged' and 'underprivileged' have been commonly integrated to depict the victims of discrimination.

The main conclusion of scholars after more than three decades of extensive and strenuous exploration analysing the association between the press and the indigenous community are neither vague nor contrary (van Dijk, 2000). Though the press had been blatant in the past and are more subtle today, they indeed remain as the main rival of the ethnic minorities. It is because they assume the role of ambassadors of the dominant group, and have consistently limited the access to either centre staging the views of the ethnic minority groups or depicting them in positive ways. The definition of the minorities has always been negative and stereotypical as they are constantly viewed as problematic or threatening and are commonly associated with unconstructive themes such as crime, violence, conflicts with the dominant group. The extensive focus has always been on the explicit racialized forms of conflict whereas the press fail to take into consideration the deeper social, political and economic causes and backgrounds that might have caused these conflicts (van Dijk, 1993). From the viewpoint of 'the elites and the dominant groups,' the minorities are generally categorised as 'them' and opposed to 'us.'

Moreover, according to van Dijk (1998), one of the many problems encountered in resisting racial inequalities, particularly in a consecrated institution such as the newspaper is the inherent denial among individuals that certain parts of the views and decisions reported there do in fact have elements of discrimination. He further argues that discriminatory groups seldom admit that they are in fact prejudiced. In addition, journalists and editors rarely perceive that their views, opinions and writings may contain biased elements. van Dijk (1998) further adds that the denial of being biased is usually a defensive strategy employed by the elites and people in power to enhance in-group preservation

through positive self-representation. This unequal system of dominance hypothesises an ideological view that discrimination is an oppressive strategy employed by the elites to bolster their own power (Mills, 1997).

The trends of portrayal of the indigenous community in other parts of the world seem to correlate with the findings of local researchers such as David et al. (2010), Loh (2011), Marlina & Shakila (2016) on the depiction of the *Orang Asli*. Facets of discrimination such as portraying them as problematic, unhealthy and prone to hostility over their land rights seemed to have been majorly the preoccupation of the media about the indigenous community. The conclusion drawn from the arguments above provides the backbone for the execution of this study that pays much attention to the largely neglected *Orang Asli* and the details of their representation in the media. Hence, this study aims to investigate the major themes associated with the community when they are presented in media.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 Positioning the *Orang Asli* in Malaysia's Socio-Political Perspective

The term *Orang Asli* denotes the aboriginal minorities living in the Peninsular Malaysia (Lye, 2011). They encompass around 150,000 people – a figure which presents the community to be lesser than 1% as compared to the total population of Malaysia. According to historians and anthropologist, the *Orang Asli* belong to the following tribes; the Senoi, the Aboriginal Malay (Proto-Malay) and also the Negrito (Semang). These three groups can be further classified into six other groups (Abdullah et al., 2016).

The *Orang Asli* were the early inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia and had been actively participating in the economic and political construction of primary evolution (Nicholas et al., 2000). However, the heavy influx of immigrants (Japanese and British) resolutely coveted the resources belonging to the community, apparently after perceiving their usefulness. This situation abridged the community into ordinary salvagers of the sultans during British colonialism (Howell, 1995).

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the populations of the Peninsula embraced Islam. This conversion process involved the colonisation of the internal regions, with extensive slavery and prowling. Scholar such as Dental et al. (1997) and Roseman (1984) mention that this situation forced the non-Muslims to become slaves of the Muslims as per the teaching of Islam, which forbids a believer from keeping another believer as slaves. Known to be infidels (*kafir*), the *Orang Asli* became victims of manipulation and slavery. Researchers such as Clifford (1987), Swettenham (1880) and Wray (1903) have documented ghastly treatment given to the *Orang Asli* whereby they were treated similar to animals and were also victims of pillage and slavery. A report by Dental et al. (1997) mentions that the *Orang Asli* men were killed, some women were reported raped while other women and children were kept as slaves.

During the British colonisation period, the Malay community were accorded Malay reservations, whereas the Sakai reservations the awarded to the *Orang Asli*. However, around 1910s, Malay community were rendered rights to own land and properties, with the *Orang Asli* being denied of the same privilege. Nicholas et al. (2000) reported that a vast amount of land belonging to the community had been whisked by the government and the Malays throughout the colonial period.

The origin of policies of this community is observed in military policy drafted during the Emergency Period. The only piece of legislation focusing on the ethnic community is the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1974. The initial purpose of the policy being drafted is to prevent interaction and communication between communist insurgents and *Orang Asli*. Certain rights of the community is recognized and stipulated in the legislation as well, such as the privileges of the children of *Orang Asli* to attain equal education, zero obligation for children attending school to attend religious classes prior to consent from guardians and allocation of certain inalienable rights to adhere to their way of living (Nicholas, 2000).

However, the Aboriginal People Act at the same time provides the state authority the rights to order the community to be retained or moved out of a specific region, which means the *Orang Asli* are allowed to remain in a specific part based on the jurisdiction of state authorities. In any situation where

the state wishes to reacquire the land, the status can be revoked, leaving the *Orang Asli* no legal recourse than to shift to another area and the

The '*Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli*' (JHEOA) essays an important duty in the construction and maintenance of *Orang Asli* policies since Malaysia obtained its independence. The government's objective for progress of the *Orang Asli* community under the New Economic Policy (NEP) was to raise their financial standards in order to assimilate into the mainstream Malay community (Carey, 1968; Ruslan, 1991). This statement, presented in the policy is crucial in the sense that it provides the ground on how the *Orang Asli* would be positioned compared to the mainstream community of Malaysia.

## 2.2 Studies on *Orang Asli*

Earlier studies conducted on the *Orang Asli* have dwelled mainly on their ways of living which involved cultivation, hunting, traditional beliefs, the social relationship and social strata. According to Nicholas (2000), the focus on the *Orang Asli* is now shifting to issues which were once presumed to be sensitive as compared to earlier research focusing on traditional ethnographic studies alone. Among the contemporary issues are policies and development projects planned for the community, representation in political spheres, rights as indigenous community and also the damaging depiction in media. Shortly, the focus has shifted from traditional ethnographical studies to contemporary issues revolving around the *Orang Asli* and their current predicaments such as matters of land rights and ownerships, development projects, education opportunities, identity crises and general health issues.

Of the few studies conducted on the community, the work carried out by David et al. (2000) is exceptionally noteworthy. The results of the study showed that the community have been victims of marginalisation and negatively depicted in media. Among the themes that were associated with them were their fights for their land and customary rights and the cry for basic infrastructure such as water and electricity. The *Orang Asli* community has also been deemed to be victimised when it comes to land issues and a lack of political representation on its behalf. They were also portrayed as beneficiaries, namely when they welcomed various aids from the authorities, which supposedly presented them as a dependant community. Similarly, Loh (2011) and Marlina & Shakila (2016) found that the community had been demoted and discriminated in the mainstream media.

## 2.3 Semantic Macrostructures Theory

van Dijk's (1980) Semantic Macrostructures Theory was chosen as the primary theoretical approach to this study, owing to its effectiveness in articulating news discourse. This approach is "a more explicit and systematic approach to the study of mass media discourse in general and to news reporting in particular" (van Dijk, 1988: p.8). He added that apart from looking at the grammatical features of language such as the phonological, morphological and syntactical elements, it is also necessary to study news discourse at various other levels including the "coherence relations between sentences, overall topics, and schematic forms" (van Dijk, 1988: p8).

Macrostructures relate to higher constructions that classify a particular discourse and cognitive process (van Dijk, 1980). Multiple concepts of global meanings are accounted through macrostructures, i.e. the theme and topic, and they help to organise micro information and compress macro information, which eventually results in featuring the most important and pertinent information from a higher units of information. The relation between the micro-levels and macro-levels in terms of reduction rules is known as macro-rules. In similar perspective, macrostructures have also the vital semantic task where they provide global level meaning which are derived from the bottom level, done through the derivational process.

## 3. Methodology

This research inspects the macro structures to study the prevalent themes appearing concerning the

community. 158 news reports which appeared in *The Star* in between January 2019 to June 2019 is used as the corpus for this study. The particular newspaper was chosen due to the fact that it marked the highest readership among the English dailies in Malaysia. The following table displays the process of selecting news reports intended for analysis. The data selection went through several steps, which according to Creswell (2007), are common to studies adopting a qualitative approach. The table below illustrates the series of steps taken in collecting the news reports.

**Table 1:** Data Collection Procedure

No.	Step	Explanation
1	Determination of sampling method	The first step in collecting data is determining suitable sampling criteria so that the analysis would be rich and informative. The chosen news reports should meet the “quality assurance” (Creswell, 2007) so that the objectives of the study would be achievable. A criterion sampling method was selected to choose suitable news reports on the <i>Orang Asli</i> community. Criterion sampling, according to Patton (2002) “involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (p.238). In this case, the criteria would be relevant news about the <i>Orang Asli</i> community.
2	Locating the data	The second step involved the researchers typing the keyword “ <i>Orang Asli</i> ” in the search section of <i>The Star Online</i> webpage (www.thestar.com.my). The search results are sorted according to their relevancy to the keyword typed. All news reports concerning the <i>Orang Asli</i> that appeared from January 2019 to June 2019 are saved into MS Word format. The time period is randomly chosen and does not coincide with any major event concerning the <i>Orang Asli</i> community. This method is supported by Lin (2013) who mentions that CDA scholars nowadays opt for random sampling method to complement the traditional method of data collection.
3	Storing the data	The selected news reports are saved in MS Word format and are then coded. Backup copies are made for the files.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of semantic macrostructure is conducted through the application of the chosen theory. The macro-level analysis places emphasis on thematic structure, which according to van Dijk (1980), is defined as the process of organizing themes or topics to provide a summarized view of a discourse. Deriving the macroproposition includes several steps namely the process of deletion, generalisation and construction. This process may be repeated a few times in order to reach the final macrostructure of a text. The final proposition derived from the analysis will provide a general idea about the main concern of the text. The macrostructure is the information best remembered by readers in the construction and comprehension of a particular discourse. In addition, the construction of macropropositions can also be achieved through prior understanding or knowledge pre-possessed by the analyst or reader on the topic concerned (van Dijk, 1980).

A total of 158 semantic macrostructures have been generated from the application of macrorules into the news reports. The following table presents some sample macrostructures derived from the analysis of the news reports.

**Table 2:** Example Semantic Macrostructures

Semantic Macrostructures	Explanation
43 <i>Orang Asli</i> of the Bateq tribe died of measles outbreak.	The news report presented verbiages from the <i>Orang Asli</i> Development Department (JAKOA) relating to ongoing inquiries on deaths among the <i>Orang Asli</i> . The measles outbreak has been cited to be the main cause.
Conversion of 5000 <i>Orang Asli</i> to Islam.	The news article presents the ongoing strategies to fully convert 16,000 <i>Orang Asli</i> individuals to Islamic faith. Malaysia <i>Orang Asli</i> Development Association (MAIK) was quoted saying that 5000 <i>Orang Asli</i> from rural interiors of Kelantan have been converted to Islam by about 100 preachers.

Semantic Macrostructures	Explanation
Malnutrition and low immune system among <i>Orang Asli</i> .	The article reports that the government has built health clinics in rural areas and that the <i>Orang Asli</i> community needs to use them to seek medical treatment. The Deputy Health Minister pointed the failure of the community to obtain necessary immunization, which leads to issues such as malnutrition and weak immune system.
<i>Orang Asli</i> students received help.	The article reported that <i>Orang Asli</i> students welcomed aids to support their studies. The aid is hoped to encourage <i>Orang Asli</i> students to study harder to change their lives for better.
Improving the lives of <i>Orang Asli</i> through eco-tourism.	An <i>Orang Asli</i> village in Titiwangsa mountain range has been chosen to be part of eco-tourism project. By exhibiting their tradition and lifestyle to tourists, the project is hoped to generate income and elevate the economic well-being of the community.
<i>Orang Asli</i> is well cared for.	The Chief Minister of Perak state mentioned that some 13,000ha of land has been gazetted for the <i>Orang Asli</i> , and continuous effort to uplift their livelihood is currently progressing.

Previous research conducted on indigenous people have identified several themes that are routinely associated with their portrayal in the news media such as issues of land rights, crime and poverty. The macrostructures obtained and their frequency are categorised into major themes in the following table:

**Table 3:** Major Themes and Frequency

Major Theme	Minor/Sub Theme	Article Frequency	Focus of the Articles
Social Issues	Land rights	32	The articles focuses on land woes between the <i>Orang Asli</i> and the ruling authorities
	Amenities / Infrastructure	2	The articles focuses on the lack of basic amenities and infrastructure in the villages of <i>Orang Asli</i> .
	Poverty / Lifestyle	12	The articles reports that the community is still living under the poverty line and highlights their traditional way of living.
	Health	69	The articles focus on measles outbreak among <i>Orang Asli</i> community which resulted in catastrophic deaths.
	Education	8	<i>Orang Asli</i> children are reported to be receiving various aids in enhancing their performance in education.
	Islamization	2	The articles talk about the intention of converting <i>Orang Asli</i> community into Islamic religion.
	Crime and Law	2	Crime committed by <i>Orang Asli</i> individuals have been highlighted in the articles.
Corporate Social Responsibility	Donation	5	The highlighting of positive acts by the authorities whereby the community is shown to be receiving numerous aids from people in power.
	Welfare Policy	11	The news articles presents welfare policies which have been drafted for the <i>Orang Asli</i> community.
Economy	Development	11	The highlighting of development projects planned for the community.
Politics	By-election	4	The articles highlight the participation in the voting process. It focuses on a by-election and the support needed by the contending candidate from the <i>Orang Asli</i> community to secure a win.

Inspection of data generated four major themes or categories; politics, corporate social responsibility, social issue and economy. These themes can be further specified to eleven sub-themes; land rights, amenities/infrastructure, poverty/lifestyle, health, education, Islamization, crime and law, donation, welfare policy, development and by-election. The derivation of macrostructures validates that all articles appearing in *The Star* concerning *Orang Asli* community from January 2019 to June 2019 fall under the specified themes.

#### 4.1 Social Issues

Among 158 articles analysed, 32 articles falls under the theme of land rights. Most of the news reports focused on the civil battle between the community and also the government concerning their traditional land. The *Orang Asli* in the news reports show that they have been denied recognition to their community's rights to the customary lands. Customary lands belonging to them were taken away by the authorities. Data taken from the ministry show that the *Orang Asli* have only been gazetted reserves of 19,222.15 hectares, representing 15.1% 127,698.54 hectares in 2003. Thus, the whole of *Orang Asli* communities are forced to relocate in order for development projects to take place. Resettlement on the other hand, invariably translate to loss of customary land, and they stand the chance to lose about 70 to 80% overall land belonging to them (Nicholas and Baer, 2009).

Besides issues of relocation and resettlement, the *Orang Asli* must face the issue of reimbursement to give up their traditional lands to others, willingly or vice versa (Nobuta, 2008). If in any case of being recognized as the occupants of the land, compensation according to the thin clarification of the Aboriginal People's Act will be paid. In reality, the paid compensation only cater for the income loss due to dwelling activities and not for the value of the land itself.

The community have been demoted to become the poorest in terms of living status reports (Nicholas et al., 2010). Based on the statistics, "almost 50% of the 29,990 *Orang Asli* households in existence live below the poverty line while 19% (5700) of the same households are deemed to be in the hard core poor category" (Government's 10th Malaysia Plan 2011-2015, p.45). A more recent statistics in 2019 shows that 99.2% are categorised to be in the B40 type (low income group). Poverty level of the community is measured through lack of core facilities and infrastructure such as education, healthcare, income, potable water, electricity and proper roads. Despite seeing some improvements, the *Orang Asli* is still assumed to be left behind as compared to other population of Malaysia.

The main recurring theme in 69 news articles is related to health issue. The *Orang Asli* is also deprived in terms of health. According to JHEOA (2005), the *Orang Asli* have a 5.5 times higher risk of contracting tuberculosis and although small in population number, they registered 53.6% from the total malaria cases in 2003. JHEOA (2004) reported cases of leprosy is existent as well, from 8.74 reported cases per 100,000 individuals in 1998 and this figure rose to 19.63 in 2002. Besides the aforementioned afflictions, the older diseases and infections that were there since long ago are still plaguing the community and these include worm infestations, skin infections, diarrhoea (which may be fatal sometimes) and goitre. The health levels of the *Orang Asli* children drew bad depictions as well, with 80% of them found to be undernourished and their growth stunted with an additional assortment of intestinal bacteria, dental issues, vitamin deficiency and anaemia. According to Baer (1999) and Al-Mekhlafi et al., (2006), poverty had accelerated the health problems faced by the community. One of the main reasons of the poor health is caused by inaccessibility to health services, due to remote location of their villages (Freemantle, 2010).

8 news reports are observed under the education theme. Although the level of *Orang Asli* children's enrolment in schools have progressed considerably, the duration that they stay in school leaves much to be desired. A high dropout rate among *Orang Asli* children is also reported by JHEOA and other consultants. In the year 2007, 36.2 percent of the *Orang Asli* children dropped after primary education and 59.7% of students who were enrolled in primary schools twelve years earlier had discontinued their secondary education. Even though the rate of passes have been increasing recently, overall it has not been encouraging. To add, several did not register for school and thus missing from the statistics. A total of 7029 *Orang Asli* children below the age of 12 had never been enrolled in school in 2007, and this figure itself is deemed to have been an under-estimate. According to Ramli et al. (2013), this problem is commonly associated with cultural issues, parent consciousness, school leadership, environment of the school, and teaching and learning issues. The lack of development in health and education systems has placed the *Orang Asli* community in a quandary where they have no choice but to trail behind the mainstream society (Baer, 2010).

Two articles analysed relates to the issue of Islamisation. A gradual increment in the intensity of

Islamisation policies can be observed from 1980s. According to Carey (1970), assimilating the community into the dominant Malay community is associated with the Islamic missionary activities. In parallel viewpoint, significant favoritism were awarded to *Orang Asli* converts in jobs, and a non-Muslim *Orang Asli* in JHEOA is believed to be denied promotion to higher levels (Dentan et al., 1997). Such incidences instigated a damaging consequences on the community collectively. Such move is thought by policy makers to convince the *Orang Asli* in embracing Islamic religion in order to secure assistance from the government. There had been consequential contradictions of traditional and lawful facets in the policies drafted, which posed an elusive impact towards the Islamisation process. This resulted in the emergence of a new subgroup named the Muslim *Orang Asli*.

#### 4.2 Corporate Social Responsibility, Economy and Politics

Anyone who observes *Orang Asli* affairs will find it apparent that their lives are controlled by others than themselves. Common understanding formed regarding the community relates to them being left-behind and rely on the direction and assistance from the government. This perception has been formed through the expressed objective of the government in “integrating the *Orang Asli* into the mainstream community” as though they are incapable of developing themselves and need to be governed (Sabihah, 1989). Similar theme has been unearthed in 27 articles analysed, whereby the community is shown to be always welcoming aids, donation and other development strategies crafted by the authorities.

According to Erni (2009), the *Orang Asli* have lost the autonomy they had during the founding of the Malays sultanates. In terms of sustenance, development and identity (which includes their language, faith and culture), a clear void has become obvious between the privileges and protection accorded to them and the dominant Malays. The identity markers of the *Orang Asli* denied them the security and regards unlike the Malays. One instance would be the lack of sponsor from the state itself in protecting and promoting the culture and heritage of the *Orang Asli* community (Yogeswaran, 2007). The *Orang Asli* have also gone through multiple development strategies dictated by certain policies. Such policies heavily influence the manner in which the community is to be developed and assisted (Hood and Hasan, 1984; Rostow, 1960).

## 5. Conclusion

This study has proven that by utilizing a thematic inspection though deriving the macrostructures of news report, various predominant and overarching themes can be manifested. The main themes derived from the analysis support the findings of previous studies conducted among indigenous community, whereby elements of misrepresentation and discrimination were observed. As for the current study, media substances analysed adopt a stereotypical approach in depicting the *Orang Asli* community as the most marginalised ethnic group in Malaysia today – economically suffering, poor health conditions, denied access to amenities, and limited access to political spheres. The current study unearthed similar pattern of representation, whereby the community is shown in a limited sphere of stereotypical themes, thus reinforcing the negative and prejudiced assumption that the mainstream community has on them. Major recurring themes as inspected are land issues, health, poverty, education and welfare policy. This study calls for appropriate recognition and representation of the community to be conferred especially in print media. It is obligatory for relevant stakeholders in realising these pressing issues underlying the indigenous community.

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