

# THE ABORIGINAL TRIBES OF PÊRAK.

BY

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The wild tribes of the peninsula being Kafirs, or infidels, it is the privilege of their Malay neighbours, who are Mahomedans, to capture and make slaves of them whenever they can do so. The adult *Sakei* or *Semang* has no market value; he is untameable and is certain to escape to his native woods and mountains. Children of tender age are generally sought for; they grow up ignorant of the language of their tribe and of the wild freedom of the forest, and have, therefore, little inducement to attempt to escape. In Pêrak, Kêdah, and on the borders of Patânî, I have met *Sakei* or *Semang* slaves in bondage among the Malays, sometimes children, sometimes adults, the latter having passed their childhood in servitude. They are not unkindly treated, but the mere fact that children are liable to be carried off into slavery is quite enough to account for the distance which the aborigines generally put between themselves and the Malays. An investigation which has resulted in the severe punishment of six Malays found guilty of dealing in *Sakei* children in Ulu Pêrak has lately, it is believed, struck a death-blow at this practice, as far as the State of Pêrak is concerned. No less than seven children were recovered in various Malay villages by the exertions of the Police. Some difficulty was experienced in



getting into communication with the tribes from whom they had been stolen, but eventually five men came down to the British Residency at Kwala Kangsa charged by the mothers and other relations of the missing children to take them back. Most of the children had been taken from their relations by men of their own or other tribes, most likely at the instigation of the Malays, to whom they were afterwards sold. Among the Malays they are worth from thirty to forty dollars apiece. A Patânî Malay confessed to me, some years ago, that he cultivated the acquaintance of some *Sakei jînak*, (tame *Sakeis*, who mix with the Malays) because he could get them to steal children for him. For a few trifling articles, which seemed to the savage to be untold wealth, the latter would start off to procure an unlucky infant with whom to pay his creditor. Sometimes, the Malay told me, a man would be away for two months, eventually bringing a child snatched from some tribe at Ulu Kêlantan or Ulu Pahang.

The men who came down to the Residency at Kwala Kangsa were of different tribes. In Ulu Pêrak the *Semangs* and *Sakeis* of the plains seem to mix, both being distinct from the *orang bukit* or *Sakei bukit*, the men of the mountains, who are described as being fairer and better-looking than the others.

I greatly regret that circumstances did not permit me to have, these people under observation for more than one day, and that my notes regarding them are, therefore, necessarily meagre.

The names of the five men are KOTA, BANCHA, BUNGA, BELING and NAGA. KOTA is a *Semang*, and so far civilised that he adopts Malay dress when he visits a *kampong*. The others wore a *chawat*, or waist-cloth, of some cotton material purchased from the Malays, not the back *chawat*, which I have seen in the Kinta district. They do not all belong to the same tribe, and do not all speak the same language, though able to communicate freely with each other. A vocabulary was supplied to me by KOTA. The other men gave signs of dissent several times when he gave his version of the word wanted, but the list was made late at night, and I had no time to take down several equivalents of the same word. I hope, on some future occasion, to be able perhaps to do so. The skin-disease remarked by most travellers, who have had an opportunity of observing the aborigines of the peninsula was noticeable in all



of these people. One of them had brought his blow-pipe and poisoned darts with him, and willingly exhibited the manner of using them. The dart is dropped into the muzzle of the weapon and allowed to fall down to the mouth-piece, where a piece of some soft substance resembling fungus is inserted, in order that none of the force of the air may be lost. The mouth-piece is taken *into* the mouth, not merely applied to the lips. A small bird on the leaf of a cocoanut tree was the object aimed at. It was not struck, but the silent operation of the projectiles was evinced by the manner in which the intended victim remained in its place, while dart after dart passed close to it, evidently unconscious that it was being aimed at. I had always regarded the blow-pipe as a breech-loader and was somewhat astonished to see the darts inserted at the muzzle and shaken down through the tube. I should mention, however, that the marksman was in perfectly open ground. In the forest this method of loading has obvious disadvantages.

As an illustration of the superstitions of these people and their belief in, and dread of, the powers of evil, I may state that a message reached me from some of the headmen of a tribe in Ulu Pêrak stating their unwillingness to receive back two of the children known to be at the British Residency. Both were believed to be the inheritors of evil-spirits (*pelisit* or *bajang*), which had possessed their fathers. The father of one of them had actually been killed by the general consent of the tribe in consequence of the numerous cases of sickness and death which had occurred in a particular place, all of which were traced to the *pelisit*, which was believed to possess him. The man chosen to carry out the sentence was the brother of the doomed man. His child was sold to Malays from fear that the *pelisit*, compelled to change its quarters, might have found a dwelling place in her.

Thunder, I was told, is greatly dreaded by the wild tribes. When it thunders the women cut their legs with knives till the blood flows, and then catching the drops in a piece of bamboo, they cast them aloft towards the sky to propitiate the angry deities.

Singing and dancing are arts which are not unknown among the aborigines, though, as may be supposed, they are still in a very early stage of development. Dancing is confined to the female sex, which was not represented among the *Sakei* visitors at the Residency.



but of their music and singing, I had a fair specimen. *Bersempul* is the word by which the Pêrak Malays describe a gathering of *Sakeis* for music and dancing. (It does not appear to have been known to the compilers of Malay dictionaries).

Sitting together in a circle and facing inwards, the five men commenced a series of long chants or recitations in quick time. The instruments on which they accompanied themselves were made of pieces of bamboo. One held two short lengths or tubes of bamboo (green and recently cut) in an upright position on a horizontal wooden log, one in each hand. These were raised and then brought down on the log alternately, producing a ringing and not unmusical sound, which had something of the effect of the beating of a tom-tom. Two others beat pieces of bamboo held in the left hands with other pieces held in the right, after the manner of the Malay *cherachap*. There was no hesitation or difficulty about recollecting words; the man who led was followed by the other four, who were generally about a note behind him. The general result was monotonous, the performers sometimes chanting rapidly on the same note for nearly a minute together. Their whole range did not exceed three or four notes, I imagine.

The first song was the *Lagu Gias*, or song of the *Gias* tree. This was an enumeration of fruit-bearing trees, and of the favourite mountains and forests of the *Sakeis*. It is said to be held in great veneration, and may contain the germs of the traditions of this singular people. Next came the *Lagu Chenaku*, or song of the tiger-spirit. *Chenaku* or *Blian* is the *Sakei* name for the man who, under the semblance of human form, conceals his identity as a tiger, better known by the Malay word *Jadi-jadi-an*. Belief in this form of lycanthropy is widespread among the Malays as well as among the aboriginal tribes. The next song was the *Lagu Prah*, or the song of the *Prah* tree, sung when the *Prah* fruit is ripe, no small occasion of festivity among the forest tribes. The fruit (the nature of which I do not know) is sliced up and mixed with other ingredients (*rojak*) and then cooked in lengths of bamboo (*lemang*).

The performance concluded with the *Lagu Durian*, a song in praise of the *Durian* fruit. This like the others was unfortunately unintelligible to me, but it may be presumed that the *Sakei* estimate of this fruit is a high one.



The men received a few trifling presents, and went away in great delight. It was explained that what they principally fear in visiting inhabited places is the ridicule and contumely heaped upon them by the Malays. This is not astonishing, for at Sungei Raya in the Kinta district, I was a witness, a few months ago, of the kind of treatment *Sakei* men and women sometimes receive in a Malay *kampong*. A *Sakei* man followed by two or three girls (above the average in good looks, judging by a Malay standard) who had come to see the Pěngûlu, was literally hooted by all the small boys of the *kampong*, who ridiculed his accents, his dress (or rather his want of dress), his walk, and everything belonging to him. From this state of things it follows that for trustworthy accounts of *Sakeis* one must seek out the tribes in the forests and adopt a line of original enquiry. Stories about *Sakeis*, received second-hand from the Malays, are seldom worthy of implicit credit; the aboriginal tribes are interesting to the Malays only so far as they are useful agents in clearing jungle, procuring gutta, or assisting in the more questionable pursuit of child-stealing.



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