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Jahid Siraz Chowdhury · Kumarashwaran Vadevelu ·

Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh ·

Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad · Zulkarnain A. Hatta



The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh

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Jahid Siraz Chowdhury
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Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh
Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad • Zulkarnain A. Hatta

The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh

 Springer

Jahid Siraz Chowdhury
Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts &
Humanities
Lincoln University College
Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Kumarashwaran Vadevelu
Department of Social Administration
and Justice
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh
School of Social Sciences
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia

Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad
Faculty of Education
Universiti Malaya
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Zulkarnain A. Hatta
Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and
Humanities
Lincoln University College
Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

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We all want peace, harmony, rights, and respect. We need to be careful with Eurocentrism, or even Marxism, in post-colonialism. Marxist Social Worker Bob Pease suggested that social workers should question the status of their “professional knowledge” as a more appropriate and ethical practice. We agree, yet argue, this ethics has to be based on the society, culture, and heritage of Muslim-majority countries. Both Malaysia and Bangladesh may follow the Ihsanic philosophy where we follow Muslim brotherhood, peace, and inclusion. We do not want any more “righting wrongs” by establishing justified self-interest, but rather the commoning of the community for peace, harmony, and justice-based righteous society.

This tome is for those who dedicated their intelligence and labor for applying this message in academia and political policy, now and in the future...

Foreword

In 2012, I [first author] presented the critical topic of religious conversion in Bangladesh, which marked a watershed point in our country's history. Dr. Jahid Siraz Chowdhury's deep observations during the difficult period of the COVID-19 epidemic in 2021 renewed my commitment to campaigning against colonization, Christianization, and the erasing of cultural identities. Since then, our joint journey has been both enlightening and inspirational, emphasizing the significance of elevating the voices of marginalized people. In a similar spirit, Dr. Jahid and his respected team launched a ground-breaking investigation into the Orang Asli issue in Malaysia, adding new dimensions to the debate over conversion.

It is with great pleasure that I turn to and introduce *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh*, an enlightening work authored by Dr. Jahid Siraz Chowdhury, Dr. Kumarashwaran Vadevelu, Dr. Paramjit Singh, Dr. Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad, and the distinguished Social Work expert, Prof. Zulkarnain A. Hatta. As a researcher who is passionately devoted to the study of sociology and the examination of Indigenous cultures, the profound insights and empathy revealed within the pages of this book have impacted me greatly.

In a world where marginalized people's voices are frequently silenced, *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh* is a striking monument to the tenacity and fortitude of Malaysian Orang Asli and Bangladeshi Santals. Through rigorous research and thoughtful analysis, the authors present a compelling platform to shine light on the issues that these communities confront, emphasizing the critical need of recognizing their unique contributions to society. What stands out most about this work is its consistent emphasis on empathy and understanding. The writers approach the issue with humility and compassion, acknowledging the subtle nuances of cultural identity, as well as the significant effect of historical and societal forces on the lives of the Orang Asli and Santal people. By amplifying their voices and sharing their experiences, this book encourages readers to enter their world and see reality through their eyes.

I am very grateful to Springer Nature for the chance to publish this vital work, and I am convinced that it will motivate readers to engage with these critical

concerns and contribute toward establishing a more inclusive and fair society for future generations. It is my genuine goal that *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh* can operate as a catalyst for good change, inspiring meaningful debate and igniting powerful action in communities throughout the world. I hope, in the near future, scholars shall come out to continue this tenacity that was seeded in this small tome.

Professor of Sociology
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore, Singapore

Md Saidul Islam

Preface

As authors of *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh*, we are excited, anxious, and delighted to share this almost untouched issue in both countries with our readers. This shared endeavor, which stems from our shared concern for social justice and cultural preservation, seeks to shed light on the complicated problems surrounding religious conversion and its impact on marginalized Indigenous groups. Throughout our investigation, we were impressed by the perseverance and strength of Malaysia's Orang Asli and Bangladesh's Santal. Their tales impacted the storyline of this book and provided us with a better understanding of the issues they encounter. We feel it is critical to raise their voices and campaign for their rights since they represent a diverse cultural legacy that is frequently disregarded. This study is motivated by a common conviction in the value of individual tales. We passionately think that people should not be reduced to numbers, but rather recognized as distinct individuals with their own experiences, ambitions, and challenges. We think that by focusing our study on the stories of the Orang Asli and the Santal, we can humanize the debate around religious conversion and promote empathy and understanding. In our research of these communities, we used a phenomenological method that allowed us to dive into people's lived experiences. We wanted to present a "thick description" that captured the subtleties of their tales and the complexity of their identities. We aimed to give a full and holistic view of the issue by combining primary and secondary data sources. Throughout this work, we attempted to question dominant narratives and shed light on the diverse nature of religious conversion. We investigate the historical, social, and cultural circumstances that affect the experiences of the Orang Asli and Santal. We investigate the effects of conversion on several elements of their life, including language and social organizations, education, and the loss of Indigenous knowledge.

Why This Book Is Unique and Vital

This book carves a distinct space in the conversation on religious conversion. While existing scholarship like Shah and Carpenter (2017), Moffett (1998, 2005), Gay (2020), and Cane & Bown (2017) explore Christianity’s historical spread, they often focus on broader regional trends. Aljunied (2008) examines Islam in Malaysia, but our work zeroes in on the under-examined impact on Indigenous communities. Our uniqueness lies in centering the human experience. Unlike historical accounts by Chadwick (1998), we prioritize the narratives of the Orang Asli and the Santals, similar to Lindenfeld’s (2009) exploration of Indigenous experiences with Christianity. We move beyond religious freedom debates (Musa, 2010) by delving into the social and cultural costs. This focus on “people, not population” sets us apart from works on Indigenous psychology (Mohanty & Misra, 2002; Dueck, 2021; Ratner, 2008). We bridge the gap between social work and Indigenous studies, offering practical tools like intersectionality for social workers to navigate these complexities. This focus on social work practice, alongside rich ethnographic detail, makes this book a valuable resource for academics, social workers, and anyone interested in the ethical dimensions of conversion within Indigenous communities.

We also discuss the role of social workers in assisting those who have suffered religious conversions. We emphasize intersectionality, cultural competency, and ethical issues as critical components of effective and inclusive social work practice. We seek to enhance the field of social work by providing scholarly viewpoints, ideas from development professionals, and activist voices.

People, Not Population: Unveiling the Human Cost of Conversion in Indigenous Communities

This book delves into the complex and often under-examined territory of religious conversion within Indigenous communities. It transcends mere demographic shifts by offering a poignant exploration of “*people, not population*”—our journey into the lived experiences of the Orang Asli in Malaysia and the Santals in Bangladesh—uncovering the multifaceted narratives of conversion and its impact on their identities, social structures, and cultural heritage.

The *Glocal* Spectrum and the “Why” of Conversion

The book situates itself within the “*glocal*” spectrum, where global forces like religious missions intertwine with local contexts of Indigenous communities. This approach allows us to delve into the “whys” of conversion—the motivations, pressures, and consequences that shape individual and collective decisions. We explore

how this phenomenon transcends simple faith changes, touching upon issues of power, development agendas, and historical trauma.

A Phenomenological Approach and Thick Description

The research employs a phenomenological approach, striving to understand the lived experiences of conversion from the perspectives of the Orang Asli and the Santals. By employing “thick description,” we weave together rich narratives, ethnographic observations, and visual tools like photovoice to paint a vivid picture of their realities.

Breaking the Dichotomy: People as Outsiders Within

We acknowledge the inherent complexities of research within Indigenous communities. As researchers, we navigate the position of “outsiders within,” recognizing the limitations of our perspective while striving for ethical and culturally competent engagement. We acknowledge the power dynamics at play and ensure the voices of the communities are at the forefront of the narrative.

Beyond Statistics: Narratives and the Loss of “Indigenous-ness”

Moving beyond cold statistics, the book delves into the human cost of conversion. We explore how conversion narratives highlight a sense of duality, a disruption of traditional identities, and a potential loss of “Indigenous-ness.” The narratives reveal the fracturing of social structures, the erosion of languages and knowledge systems, and a sense of historical dispossession.

Social Work and the Imperative of Intersectionality

The concluding chapters explore how social work can be better equipped to address the complexities of conversion within Indigenous communities. We advocate for the application of intersectionality, recognizing the interplay of factors like race, ethnicity, religion, and class. Cultural competence and ethical considerations are crucial for social work professionals to navigate these sensitive situations.

Restoring, Rewriting, and Re-righting: A Call for Social Harmony

The book concludes by exploring pathways toward restoring the collective memory of the Orang Asli and the Santals —as a means of commoning these communities (Chowdhury et al., 2024). We propose a model for social harmony that acknowledges the historical trauma of conversion and seeks to rewrite and re-right narratives, restoring lost heritage and fostering inclusive dialogue. This call for change extends to social workers, urging them to engage in a reciprocal relationship with these communities, where knowledge is co-created and power dynamics are challenged.

As authors, we are cognizant of the ethical implications of our work, as well as the duty that comes with expressing the Orang Asli and Santal tales. We tried to approach our study with care and respect, acknowledging our status as outsiders in these communities. We hope that our efforts resulted in a meaningful and honest representation of their experiences. We would like to thank the community leaders, anonymous individuals, and everyone who willingly shared their story with us. This book could not have been written without their confidence and willingness to engage in the study. Their efforts have increased our awareness and respect for the complexity of religious conversion. Finally, we hope that *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh* can serve as a catalyst for debate, understanding, and good change. We ask our readers to immerse themselves in the stories told in this book, to think critically about the concerns discussed, and to join us in working for the rights and well-being of marginalized Indigenous populations across the world.

Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Jahid Siraz Chowdhury

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Prof. Md Saidul Islam deserves special recognition for his essential effort to authoring the foreword for this book. We also would like to thank the committed staff at Springer Nature, notably Praveena John and Janet Kim, for their continuous support during this research. We are grateful to Prof. Rajendra Baikady, series editor, whose inspiration and advice helped shape this endeavor. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers who provided intelligent advice and astute ideas that considerably improved the book's shape and format. We also thank Springer's production and marketing staff for their efforts to spread our message to a global audience.

A special thank you to my (Jahid Siraz Chowdhury) family, particularly my wife, Farji, and our children, Ara and Soha, for their unfailing support and understanding during the arduous fieldwork and writing process. I am quite thankful to Mr. Tyson, whose efforts in printing and proofreading the text have been priceless.

A big thanks is due to two persons, my Research Assistant, Mr. Kartik Raja, whose patient labor is on every page of the book, and my HR Director, Mr. Mahendran of Lincoln University College, who facilitated my office space, arranging Kartik's smooth appointment. Prof. Bexci, Dr. Murali, Dr. Anjali, Dr. Puva, and the entire Lincoln team have made significant contributions to this study. We appreciate Ms. Dunima's aid in reading my hieroglyphic handwriting, as well as Mr. Tareq's sharp eye for mistakes and correct photo formatting.

We gratefully appreciate all of the individuals whose names we have listed, as well as many more, for their assistance throughout our journey. May the Lord bless you and your loved ones.

Note to Readers

A Call for *Ihsanic* Ethics—Good Deeds and Actions for Good Deeds and Actions

This book sheds light on the humanitarian elements of Malaysia's Orang Asli and Bangladesh's Santal communities, demonstrating their untold fortitude in the face of marginalization. In any means, this is purely an academic endeavor, and our intention is to make a better and inclusive society.

Recognizing their economic potential and appreciating their efforts can promote societal peace. Despite their disparities, international frameworks provide opportunities for connection while pushing for inclusion and cultural preservation. Taking this difficult and politically controversial issue for social concern, we approach it with humility and sensitivity, guided by the principles of *Ihsan* (excellence) and our core values. Our honest objective is to promote conversation, understanding, and compassion rather than to incite controversy or discord. We understand that Malaysia and Bangladesh have Muslim-majority populations, and we are convinced that the notion of *Ihsan* applies to all areas of human existence, including the treatment and inclusion of marginalized minorities. Our moral expectation is that all marginalized groups, including Indigenous people, be given their appropriate position in policymaking, academia, and fraternal connections.

“Righting wrongs”—seems an uneven phrase—not only true—is misunderstood often in our classroom and beyond. What we teach and what our students have learned in class is, to put it simply, controversial. Even if many people still don't believe it, Professor Gayatri Spivak (2004) has spent her whole career not only studying but also establishing this in academia. This expression relates to righting wrongs and resolving problems of inequity. Spivak attacks the school system for encouraging justified self-interest, which is incompatible with the Global South's focus on community and common well-being. Our critics may have misread this concept, which emphasizes the need to change from individualism to a more community-centered approach.

By investigating the interaction of faith, culture, and Indigenous identity in Malaysia and Bangladesh, we hope to shed light on the issues encountered by marginalized populations and fight for their rights and respect. Our goal is to provide a space where varied opinions may be heard, understanding can thrive, and the ideals of justice and compassion are upheld. We encourage readers to approach this work with an open mind and a desire to embrace the virtues of empathy, inclusion, and societal peace.

Jahid Siraz Chowdhury
Kumarashwaran Vadevelu
Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh
Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad
Zulkarnain A. Hatta

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Contents

1	Introduction and Motivation of the Book	1
1.1	Motivation of the Study: “Indigenous Communities Are People, Not Population”	1
1.2	What Conversion Is: What Is Misrepresentation?	2
1.3	Phenomenology of Context of Malaysia and Bangladesh	4
1.4	The Orang Asli and the Santal: Place and People	6
1.4.1	Malaysia and Its Indigenous Communities	6
1.4.2	Bangladesh and Its “Small Ethnic Groups”	6
1.5	Ethnographic Setting	7
1.5.1	The Santal	7
1.5.2	The Orang Asli	10
1.6	How to Use These Narratives?	10
1.7	Organization of the Book	11
	References	12
2	Conceptualization and Existing Scholarship and Way of Seeing	17
2.1	Introduction	17
2.2	Why a Phenomenological Approach Is Best Suited	17
2.3	Conceptualization	18
2.3.1	Concept of Conversion	18
2.3.2	The Holy Trinity of Belief, Traditions, and Selfhood in the Enigmatic World of Conversion	19
2.3.3	Archaeology of Indigenous	20
2.3.4	Nation-State and the Imagined Community	20
2.3.5	Conversion as Culturalism, Colonization, and Capitalism: Legitimizing Science Conversion	21
2.4	Way of Gathering Narratives	22
2.4.1	Primary Data: Oral History, Interview, Observation, and Field Note	22
2.4.2	Initiative on Reciprocal Research	23
2.4.3	Engaging into the Santal Village	23

2.5 When We Are “Outsiders Within”: The Axiological Concern of the Study 24

2.5.1 Locating the Indigenous in the Western Philosophy: Are They “People Without History” and “Sub-human”? . . . 25

2.6 Conclusion 26

References 26

3 The Orang Asli Narratives and Visualizing the Orang Asli-ness Questioned 29

3.1 Introduction: We Have Names 29

3.2 Conversion Creates Duality: Some Narratives 30

3.2.1 Case 1: Broken Bondage 30

3.2.2 Case 2: Lost Language 31

3.2.3 Case 3: One Edge to Another: Discrimination 32

3.2.4 Case 4: Impact on Social Organizations, Institutions: Family, Marriage 34

3.2.5 Case 5: Seeing Hegelian “Actual Mind” in Malaysian Forest 36

3.2.6 Photovoice 37

3.3 Uniting Through Dividing: We Need to Address the Reality and Brotherhood Feelings 41

3.3.1 Social Sustenance System 41

3.3.2 Education as Elimination 42

3.3.3 Language Lost 43

3.3.4 Loss of Heritage 44

3.4 Loss of Indigenous Knowledge 46

3.5 Reflection and Conclusion 48

References 48

4 Conversion Narratives of the Santals: Edges with Visualization 51

4.1 Introduction 51

4.2 Is Indigenous a Common Good? Some Oral Narratives of the One Edge 51

4.2.1 The Resistance Against “Development” and Enlightenment Project of the British 52

4.2.2 Conversion as Civilizing Mission Among the Indigenous Since 53 BC: Documents as Lived Narratives 53

4.3 Conversion Trap as “Development”: Location of the Santal-ness in the Religious Minority 54

4.3.1 Case 1: The Lived Experience of Maya 55

4.3.2 Case 2: Converted yet Wearing Santal Costumes 56

4.3.3 Case 3: Role of Faith-Based Development and Fractured Santal Identity 57

4.3.4 Case 4: Faith Matters to Deeper Family Bondage 59

4.3.5 Case 5: Conversion Loosens Santal Cohesion 61

4.4 Philanthropic Colonialism 63

4.4.1	Who Lives Inside? Mission and Development	63
4.4.2	Role of the Nongovernment Sector in Bangladesh: Invisible Civilizing Mission yet Development Means Christianization	64
4.4.3	The Role of Social Science and Social Work Professionals: Mimic Scholars.	66
4.5	Conclusion	67
	References.	69
5	The Conversion in Indigenous Communities: Enhancing Social Work Practice Through Intersectionality, Cultural Competence, and Ethical Considerations	73
5.1	Introduction	73
5.2	Intersectionality in Religious Conversion: The Santal and the Orang Asli	74
5.3	Supporting Converted Individuals with Cultural Competence	75
5.4	Developing Cultural Humility	76
5.5	Building Trust and Rapport	76
5.6	Affirming Cultural Identity and Traditions	77
5.7	Understanding Intersectional Dynamics	77
5.8	Navigating Power Dynamics and Informed Consent.	77
5.9	Collaboration and Community Engagement	77
5.10	Culturally Competent Interventions.	78
5.11	Ethical Considerations in Conversion for Social Work Practitioners: Some Academic, Development Professional, and Activists' Perspectives.	78
5.12	Enhancing Conversion Social Work Practice.	80
5.13	Respecting Individual Autonomy and Informed Consent	81
5.14	Navigating Power Dynamics and Vulnerability	81
5.15	Cultural Sensitivity and Respect for Traditions	81
5.16	Intersectionality and Addressing Inequalities	81
5.17	Collaboration and Community Engagement	82
5.18	Scholarly Case Studies and Local Individuals as Examples	82
5.18.1	Social Work Professors Advocating for Religious Minorities.	82
5.18.2	Muslim Scholars and Social Workers Promoting Interfaith Collaboration	83
5.19	Conclusion	84
	References.	84
6	Restoring, Rewriting and Re-righting: An Ethnological/Comparative Appraisal	87
6.1	Introduction: Breaking the Shell of Power-Science-Development-Trade of Social Work	87
6.2	Restoring the Collective Memory of Orang Asli and the Santal	88
6.3	Rewriting the Lost History and Historical Trauma	89

- 6.4 The Lost Heritage of Malaysia’s Orang Asli and the Santal 90
 - 6.4.1 Case of Malaysia 91
- 6.5 An Inclusive Model for Social Harmony 91
 - 6.5.1 Case of Malaysia 91
 - 6.5.2 Case of Bangladesh 93
- 6.6 Concluding Remarks 95
- References. 95
- 7 Conclusion: “Righting Wrong”—How Long? 99**
 - 7.1 A Transformation Is a Call for Social Workers:
Can We Be Reciprocal? 99
 - 7.2 Reciprocity in Indigenous Land. 100
 - 7.2.1 Come Together by Names: Orang Asli and Santal 101
 - 7.3 What We Have Done Here and What to Do: Outcome
and Future Research. 102
 - 7.3.1 What We Have Done 103
 - 7.3.2 What Are the Nuances 104
 - 7.3.3 What Needs to Be Done: Veering to a Sustained
Thinking. 105
 - 7.4 The Conclusion: What We Have Done Here and What to Do
as Future Research. 106
 - 7.4.1 SDG 16 and the Intersection of Converted Orang
Asli of Malaysia and Santal of Bangladesh. 108
 - References. 109
- Glossary 113**
- Index. 117**

About the Authors

Jahid Siraz Chowdhury teaches in the Master of Social Work Program at Lincoln University College in Malaysia. He is also associated with the Research and Training Forum (RTF). Chowdhury's academic pursuits encompass methodological contributions to the Sociology of Knowledge, and innovative applications of social theory, including the development of the Bio-Bank Model for Indigenous Knowledge. He is the author of 10 influential books, including *Ubuntu Philosophy for the New Normalcy* (Palgrave, 2023), *Reciprocity and Its Practice in Social Science* (IGI Global, 2022), *Volunteering in Social Research* (Routledge, 2024, in press), *History and Educational Philosophy for Social Justice and Human Rights* (IGI Global, 2024), and *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh* (Springer, in press).

Dr. Jahid's intellectual journey is increasingly oriented toward the profound realms of spirituality and Sufism. Guided by his master, Prof. Zulkarnain A. Hatta—a revered Sufi Master (Murshid)—Dr. Jahid is not merely exploring these disciplines but is also reconnecting with them on a deeper, more intellectual level. His works, *Spiritual Social Work Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*, published by TRC Sapphire, reflect this inward focus. His forthcoming volumes delve further into this exploration, with titles such as *Spirituality in Social Work Practice*, *Sacred Sources of Coping*, and *Including the Excluded in Social Work Pedagogy: Marginalized and Indigenous Communities through Reciprocal Research*. In *Sufi Mirror: Human Nature Through Philosophical Anthropology*, he contemplates the intersection of human nature and philosophical thought. Currently, Dr. Jahid, along with Prof. Zulkarnain and Dr. Kumar, is engaged with the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE) on a project titled *Ubuntu, Guyub, and Buen Vivir: A Cosmovisionic Guide for ASEAN Social Work Practice*. His masterwork in progress, *Sufi Dictionary: A Lexicon of Social Justice and Harmony*, aims to offer a comprehensive vocabulary that bridges the spiritual and the social, promoting justice and harmony.

Additionally, he is working on a deeply personal project, a memoir titled *Zulkarnain A Hatta: Knowing an Unknowing Soulful Social Worker*. The memoir will offer a heartfelt tribute to his Sufi Murshid (Master), exploring the soulful dimensions of social work as embodied by Prof. Zulkarnain A. Hatta that may serve social work professionals.

Kumarashwaran Vadevelu is currently Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social Administration and Justice at Universiti Malaya. He completed his degree in Social Work in 2003 and his Master of Social Work (Mixed-Mode) in 2008 and his PhD in Social Work in 2015 at University Sains Malaysia. His areas of interest include gender equality, LGBT studies and community development, marginalized communities, and mental health issues. He has teaching experience of more than nine years in Social Work. During 2015–2022, he was appointed as Visiting Professor for social work studies at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, Thailand. He has published *Reviving and Re-Writing Ethics in Social Research for Commoning the Community* (IGI Global, 2024); *Volunteering in Social Research* (Routledge, 2024, in press); and *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh* (Springer, in press).

Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh is an Associate Professor and the Deputy Dean of Research, Innovation and Industry-Community Engagement at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. His research interests focus on HIV and AIDS, drug addiction, harm reduction, criminal justice, mental health, and social work with families and marginalized groups. Prior to joining the university, he worked as a Senior Police Officer in the Crime Investigation Department, Royal Malaysian Police. He was appointed by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department to serve as an advisor to the Magistrate Court Judge, providing recommendations for sentencing and the welfare of juvenile offenders. He has also been appointed by the Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development to serve as a Chairman for the Penang Child Welfare Task Force to enhance the social functioning and well-being of marginalized children. He was also a consultant for the National Anti-Drug Agency in improving drug treatment and rehabilitation. He has been a guest speaker at numerous government agencies, schools, colleges, the private sector, and NGOs. His talk is mainly on the awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDS and drug addiction in Malaysia. Along with many influential scientific papers, his major contribution is *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh* (Springer, in press).

Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad is an educationist and serves as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Universiti Malaya. At present, he is working on the drug discoveries of Indigenous communities in Bangladesh. His works include *Ubuntu Philosophy for the New Normalcy* (Palgrave, 2023), *Reciprocity and Its Practice in Social Science* (IGI Global, 2022), *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh* (Springer, in press), and *Methodological Pluralism in Asian Context* (Routledge, in press).

Zulkarnain A. Hatta is a career Social Worker and serves as Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities at Malaysia's Lincoln University College. Professor Zulkarnain was the President of the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE) and also previously served as Vice President for the Asian region of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2017–2021). He obtained a DSW, an MSW, and a BA in Criminal Justice. He belongs to both APASWE and MASW, the Malaysian Association of Social Workers. His areas of interest are safety net issues, spirituality, and social work education. Zulkarnain is a practicing, teaching, and researching social worker. He is fluent in both English and Bahasa Malaysia. He published many core volumes from reputed publishers, including *Reviving and Re-Writing Ethics in Social Research for Commoning the Community* (IGI Global, 2024); *Volunteering in Social Research* (Routledge, 2024, in press); and *The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Indigenous Community in Malaysia and Bangladesh* (Springer, in press).

List of Figures

Fig. 3.1	This is a witness of a modernizing project of a Hydraulic electric dam in the 1960s; the Community is over the side, on the hill	39
Fig. 3.2	The village, the situation of the converted Orang Asli	39
Fig. 3.3	The village, the situation of the converted Orang Asli	40
Fig. 3.4	The meeting place.	40
Fig. 3.5	The condition of the forestalls of the converted people's situations. . .	41
Fig. 6.1	An inclusive model for the Orang Asli. (Source: Author's compilation)	92
Fig. 6.2	An inclusive model for the Santal community. (Source: Author's compilation)	94

Chapter 1

Introduction and Motivation of the Book



1.1 Motivation of the Study: “Indigenous Communities Are People, Not Population”

There are two stories as seedbed of the book:

- (a) A group of 137 Orang Asli from the Bateq Tanum tribe in Kuala Lipis, Pahang, Malaysia has initiated a lawsuit in the High Court to annul their Muslim status (FMT Reporters, 2023; Solhi, 2023). The group alleges that they were “wrongfully and illegally” converted to Islam around 1993 and has since been practicing Islam in Malaysia (Don et al., 2024; Daut, 2023; Nordin et al., 2016; Masron et al., 2013).
- (b) Almost every district in the northern region of Bangladesh has tribal people. However, they live in Thakurgaon, Panchgarh, Ghoraghat of Greater Dinajpur, Lalmonirhat of Greater Rangpur, Nilphamari, Joypurhat of Greater Bogra, Panchbibi, Naogaon of Greater Rajshahi, Nachol, Chapainawabganj and Chalanbil.¹ Despite the efforts of various churches, missionary organizations engaged in the development and conversion of tribes, as well as the efforts of NGOs such as World Vision and Caritas, at least 2.5 million tribal people are still not accustomed to modern life. According to Raihan Ahmed Rana, a non-governmental development organization, what is being done with the tribals is basically development on the condition of conversion to Christianity. It cannot be desired. Bangladesh Environment Movement BapaBogra District Branch Joint General Secretary Syed Fazle Rabbi Dolar said that there has been an opportunity for thinking at the government level about protecting the balance of nature and environment in the northern region.

¹https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/workshop_ipm_dhamai.pdf

So, this book and its narrative is, yet, the intertwined trajectories of Banglaziation or Malaysianization [but certainly] urbanization and conversion to Christianity from the historical backdrop to the present study, and more specifically, to the conundrum that runs through this book: what should we make of the continued existence of the Christian present [Bangladesh and Islamization] in Malaysia? (Chua, 2012, p.5).

This book explores the unique tapestry of faith, culture, and identity within Indigenous people in Malaysia and Bangladesh. It digs into the tales and lived experiences of Malaysian Orang Asli and Bangladeshi Santals, relying on existing anthropological study and firsthand research. The book investigates how religious conversion and external pressures form and, on occasion, threaten their cultural identities. Intersectionality is central to the opening chapter. This recognizes how faith, culture, race, and other social elements influence individual and community experiences. The book digs into conversion tales, investigating the reasons, procedures, and outcomes of religious conversion in various Indigenous societies. To ensure ethical and responsible engagement, the chapter discusses the ethnographic technique used, including research methods and ethical considerations. Voltaire's assertion that "no problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking" (Morley, 1882) serves as a philosophical impetus for addressing the intricate challenge of social inclusion for the Orang Asli and Santal communities in Malaysia. Echoing this sentiment, Mignolo (2000) emphasizes the importance of decolonizing knowledge to understand and address the complexities faced by Indigenous peoples. By engaging in rigorous intellectual inquiry, drawing inspiration from the epistemological frameworks of the Global South as suggested by Mignolo (2000), this study posits that novel approaches to this persistent issue may emerge. Chapter 7 will delve deeper into these alternative perspectives. Finally, a comparative method is used to examine the similarities and differences between the Orang Asli and Santals' experiences in order to expand understanding and provide larger insights. This path of investigation is driven by known works such as Barker (1992, 2008), Chua (2012), Chua et al. (2019), Robbins (2014), and Sahlins (1985, 1996). Recent scholarship by Gone (2023), Siemensma and McCulloch (2022), and Lindquist (2023) further informs and enriches the analysis. The book intends to shed light on the complexities and nuances of faith, culture, and identity in Malaysia and Bangladesh's Indigenous contexts by weaving together multiple perspectives and interacting with these communities' lived experiences.

1.2 What Conversion Is: What Is Misrepresentation?

Religious conversion, particularly among Indigenous cultures, is a multidimensional phenomenon filled with misunderstandings and misrepresentations. These errors can come from a variety of sources, promoting damaging stereotypes and masking the complexities of personal and communal experiences. One common misinterpretation is depicting conversion as a single, linear event. This reductionist

viewpoint ignores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of faith journeys. Conversion often occurs gradually, affected by a variety of causes such as social influences, personal exploration, and cultural resonances. Anthropologists have emphasized that understanding conversion as a complicated process of negotiation, reinterpretation, and ongoing negotiation within many social and historical contexts is essential (Dein & Littlewood, 2020; Lösel, 2022). Furthermore, simple narratives frequently depict conversion as a one-way transition from “traditional” to “modern” belief systems. This overlooks the agency and intricate negotiations that are involved in the process. Indigenous cultures may selectively embrace features of new faiths while preserving key elements of their ancient worldviews, resulting in a blend of beliefs and behaviors. Misrepresentations frequently ignore the power dynamics at work in conversion narratives. Colonial legacies and proselytization activities can wield undue power, resulting in charges of coercion and cultural loss. Scholars such as Asad (2003) and Mamdani (2002) emphasize the importance of critically examining the historical and structural forces that shape conversion experiences in order to avoid perpetuating narratives that reinforce colonial power structures or ignoring the agency of individuals and communities navigating complex situations. Misrepresentation, on the other hand, refers to the act of presenting something in an inaccurate manner, whether it is done intentionally or unintentionally. Joel Robbins’ work provides insights into the anthropology of Christianity as a relatively new phenomenon (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Where Did the Anthropology of Christianity Come From, and How Old Is It?

Having already made much of the age of the anthropology of Christianity and having noted that this is a controversial topic, it makes sense to begin my discussion of critical questions bearing on the history, status, and possible future of this area of research by taking up the question of how old it really is. On the face of things, the case for suggesting that the anthropology of Christianity is more or less a child of the new millennium is not hard to make. The appearance in 2003 and 2006 of two edited collections entitled *The Anthropology of Christianity*, one edited by myself and the other by Fenella Cannell, and the publication also in 2006 of a volume edited by Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson entitled *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*, might be taken as marking something of a watershed (and, indeed, these works have often been treated together in something like these terms in subsequent discussions, such as Barker, 2008). The editors of all three volumes claim that, at the time they were writing, the anthropology of Christianity was something new and that anthropologists had in the past largely ignored the study of Christianity, at least relative to the attention they had paid to other religious traditions, including other world religions.

(Robbin, 2014, p.158).

Recognizing these misrepresentations allows us to interact with conversion tales in a more nuanced and sympathetic way. This entails pushing beyond simplistic categorizations and acknowledging the multifaceted realities of faith experiences in Indigenous cultures. Conversion narratives, particularly within Indigenous cultures, are prone to misinterpretation from both an anthropological and a social work standpoint. Anthropologists such as Asad (2003) criticize the tendency to portray conversion as a single, linear event, ignoring its nuances and complicated social-historical context. This can result in inaccurate portrayals of agency and cultural dynamics, as well as a failure to recognize syncretism and reinterpretations within communities (Mamdani, 2002). Social work professionals, influenced by authors such as Farr (2012), emphasize the risks of power imbalances and misinformation in conversion narratives. Colonial legacies and proselytization operations may be misinterpreted, overlooking coercion and cultural erosion (Ben-Oren et al., 2023). Furthermore, cultural distortion through translation can lead to misconceptions and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes (Faiq, 2008; Francis & Francis, 2010). By critically evaluating these misrepresentations, these disciplines can foster sensitive and nuanced understandings of conversion among Indigenous cultures. This entails recognizing the intricate interplay of individual choices, social influences, and historical settings in order to encourage culturally competent and ethical engagement with varied perspectives.

1.3 Phenomenology of Context of Malaysia and Bangladesh

Studying the complex interplay of faith, culture, and identity within Indigenous communities in Malaysia and Bangladesh requires a methodology that connects with the personal essence of their everyday experiences. These groups have intricate and personal connections with their religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and self-identity, which are greatly influenced by their individual experiences and viewpoints. Phenomenology is a powerful tool for investigating by focusing on comprehending phenomena from the individual's perspective. Phenomenology allows academics to deeply investigate the complex relationship between faith, culture, and identity by studying the real-life experiences of Indigenous people. Researchers can explore the subjective complexities of Indigenous worldviews, beliefs, and practices to reveal the deeper meanings within their lived experiences. Phenomenology helps to enhance the understanding of intricate forces influencing Indigenous populations, highlighting the importance of their faith, culture, and identity in the larger sociocultural context of Malaysia and Bangladesh.

Subjectivity and meaning-making is very vital for us; unlike positivist approaches, phenomenology focuses on understanding people's unique experiences and the meanings they assign to their own journeys. This is entirely consistent with the complexities of conversion narratives and cultural interpretations in these communities.

A contextualized understanding is crucial for delving into the intricate fabric of human experiences, and phenomenology offers a powerful tool to achieve this depth of comprehension. Phenomenology allows academics to investigate how people's experiences are closely connected to their particular social, cultural, and historical environments. Colonial legacies and various religious landscapes in nations like Malaysia and Bangladesh significantly influence individuals' spiritual experiences. Researchers can uncover the intricate fabric of human experience by using a phenomenological method to explore the impact of colonial histories, cultural traditions, and religious dynamics. By using this perspective, they may analyze the complicated relationship between personal stories and larger sociocultural environments, revealing the deep processes that shape individuals' views, convictions, and behaviors. Phenomenology is a framework that helps reveal the profound meanings within individuals' lived experiences, providing valuable insights into the complex nature of faith experiences in culturally diverse societies with intricate historical backgrounds (DuBois, 2011).

"Empowering Voice" highlights how phenomenology can enhance the stories of Indigenous communities (Graham, 2022; Finlay, 2012). Phenomenology allows communities to express their tales and perceptions directly, without any external distortions or prejudices, by emphasizing first-hand testimonies and lived experiences. Centering real narratives strengthens Indigenous communities and helps prevent potential misrepresentations. Phenomenology promotes a greater awareness and respect for the various perspectives present in Indigenous societies by enabling individuals to share their personal experiences authentically. Additionally, it fosters appreciation for cultural diversity and the value of Indigenous customs, aiding in the conservation and acknowledgment of their distinct heritage (Van Manen, 1990).

"Thick Descriptions"—another iconic concept—highlights the distinctive strength of phenomenological research in capturing the depth and complexity of lived experiences through meticulous and vivid descriptions. Phenomenologists excel in exploring the various facets of faith, such as emotional, sensory, and physical elements, by deeply engaging with the subjective experiences of individuals in Indigenous cultures. Phenomenological inquiry, influenced by philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, explores the perception of faith throughout different cultures by focusing on the embodied experience. Phenomenology reveals the complexities of religious practices, rituals, and beliefs by providing extensive narratives that capture the depth of human experience (Merleau-Ponty in Carroll, 2014). While other methodologies, such as sociological surveys, provide useful insights, phenomenology's emphasis on human meaning-making and rich context makes it especially suited to investigating the complex links between faith, culture, and identity in Indigenous groups in Malaysia and Bangladesh. This approach enables us to move beyond broad generalizations and delve into the richness of lived experiences, creating a greater knowledge and appreciation for their various realities.

1.4 The Orang Asli and the Santal: Place and People

1.4.1 *Malaysia and Its Indigenous Communities*

Malaysia is a diverse tapestry created from the threads of various ethnicities, faiths, and civilizations. Positioned at the crossroads of trade routes, its history displays a convergence of influences, resulting in a diverse mosaic of identities. The population is dominated by Malays, Chinese, and Indians, reflecting the country's cosmopolitan background (Khalid & Yang, 2021). Furthermore, the Orang Asli, or Indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, add to this diversity through their own rituals and belief systems (Shah et al., 2018). Malaysia is a religiously harmonious country despite its variety, with Islam being the predominant faith. In addition, the Chinese practice Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity, while the Indian community follows Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Smaller communities, such as Sikhs, Buddhists, and Christians, enrich the religious landscape (Sumari et al., 2020). This religious pluralism generates a sense of solidarity despite differences, as evidenced by national celebrations of many festivals.

Malaysia's linguistic identity reflects its multicultural character, with Bahasa Malaysia acting as the official language alongside English, which is widely used in commerce and education. Mandarin, Tamil, and Indigenous languages enrich the linguistic tapestry, highlighting the country's linguistic variety (Nordin et al., 2018). Furthermore, the urban-rural divide contrasts modernity and tradition, capturing Malaysia's societal complexity. Beyond demographics, Malaysia's Indigenous belief systems provide valuable insights into its cultural past. The Orang Asli, which include several ethnic groups such as the Temuan and Senoi, have a strong spiritual connection to nature (Sayok & Teucher, 2018). Animism pervades their worldview, which assigns spiritual existence to natural components. Ancestor worship and traditional healing methods contribute to cultural richness, whereas cosmic beliefs emphasize the universe's interconnection. In essence, Malaysia's cultural environment demonstrates its durability and adaptability. Despite industrialization, Indigenous belief systems continue, demonstrating a great respect for tradition and nature. Recognizing and safeguarding this cultural history is critical to developing a more equitable and sustainable future for Malaysia.

1.4.2 *Bangladesh and Its “Small Ethnic Groups”*

Despite officially rejecting the “Indigenous” designation, Bangladesh faces a complex reality in which numerous ethnic groupings struggle with marginalization amid contradicting labels such as “Small Ethnic Group” and the controversial “Indigenous.” Despite ratifying Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (UN-REDD Programme, 2015), gaps in policy implementation persist (Giacomini, 2022). Beyond categories, nuanced challenges occur. Sultana (2023) reveals paradoxes in multilingual ecology, when Indigenous languages are neglected.

Debnath (2020) illustrates how exclusionary educational systems affect communities such as the Santals. Roy et al. (2021) stress the relationship between ethnicity, religion, and vulnerability during the epidemic. Moving forward, it is critical to recognize varied identities, such as the Adivasi (Sumon, 2022), and tailor solutions to individual requirements (Hossain, 2016, 2018). Only by transcending identities and embracing inclusivity can Bangladesh create an equitable society for all (Lewis, 2011; Hasan & Hasan, 2017; Mahmood, 2018).

1.5 Ethnographic Setting

1.5.1 *The Santal*

For methodological flavor, it reminds us of their history, traditions, customs, and political awareness. In this study, participant observation briefly describes Sidhu-Kanu insurgent history. However, it matches part of the methodological observation to grasp Santal customary rules.

The Santal people are Pro-Australoid (Skrefsrud, 2023) and carrying on non-Aryan ancestry. According to Fuller (2017), the Santal People are native Indians. In "Tribals of India," C.B. Memoria said that Kol, Bhil, Santal, Kheria, and Shabra are old descendants. This post-generation resided in Chhota Nagpur, now 24 Parganas. Now, studies may relate their global growth to Hindu progress, one of their social displacement factors. As Hindus gained knowledge, money, and living standards, the Santals relocated from the plains to hills or forests (Debnath, 2012; Debnath, 2020; Doshi, 1990; Drong, 2019; Fuller, 2017; Nasrin, 2019).

After the Santal Hul in 1855, they migrated to Bangladesh parts (Rahman, 2022; Roy, 1911; Skrefsrud, 2023). Several scholars (Roy et al., 2023; Roy & Rizvi, 1990; Sarker et al., 2016; Shafie & Kilby, 2003) said that the Santals arrived in northern Bangladesh to find jobs or live hand-to-mouth. They came here for work from the start of British colonialism. They lived in northwestern Bangladesh as rail line or agri-laborers. They mostly arrived as laborers after the British Government approved the railway project (Roy & Rizvi, 1990). Thus, their habitation is near forests or railways in north Bengal. Most Santals are day workers, but this is altering what the researcher noticed. In this study, the researcher examined poverty, employment, and prosperity as causes for turning to Christianity. This group was sampled to study cultural interspersing and intersectionality among great and little tradition. Another issue is that the Santal community is patriarchal and practices intermarriage. According to sources, it is no longer in the scientific sector and has a four-tiered political leadership. These political structures maintain community order while on the field via power exercises. This ethnic minority has traditionally preferred remote areas. Thus, their lifestyles shaped their civilizations, traditions, institutions, political conduct, and ideologies. Urbanization, technology, and socioeconomic and political developments have made their lifestyle essential and changing. Plainland's

small ethnic groups likely hunted, gathered, and farmed. Forest area was progressively prepared for crops or food grains. They required land paperwork. No written records or documentation are needed to claim the land since they believed in the customary practice of owning common property resources or pools, which is their history/tradition.

The Santals thought that whoever cleared the forest or made it ploughable and cultivable owned it. The 1793 East India Company (EIC) Permanent Land Settlement Acts modified this custom. Numerous Santal revolts occurred in 1811, 1820, and 1831 against the state's infringement on these basic rights. The coordinated and widespread revolution against landowners and the government to abolish the land tax happened in 1855–1856. The government launched many military operations to quell Santal uprisings in various locations. But the state is a legal system that needs legal papers to show property ownership, and they started denying ownership and land rights, which made them hostile to the state. Legal paperwork is necessary for property administration and state treasury income management, which is undesirable. Three causes explain minority populations' absence of legal documentation. Because the Santals are a minority, they are excluded from mainstream power exercises, they do not protest or go to court when property is sold for security grounds, and they lack legal expertise. They legally forfeited their land. Thus, customary norms and customs are more respected, but laws, regulations, and documents must be better understood. However, majority-minority groupings vary. Social identity prevents certain jobs and social inclusions in the sector.

Their social structure was different from mainstream populations, and they only possessed arable land when needed. When they failed to pay the EIC's higher levies, small landowners also became landless. Further, when the British corporation persecuted landowners and peasants, they revolted, and small ethnic groups rebelled in various places. These rebellions against colonialism were led by subcontinental minorities. An example can be seen—during 1831–1832, Chhota Nagpur uprising. The “Munda Rebellion” (1899–1900) headed by Birsa Munda occurred in Chhota Nagpur's jungle.

Imagine walking into a thriving community tucked among green fields, alive with the rhythms of daily life. The air is filled with laughter and chatter, punctuated with Santali musical cadences (Rahman, 2022). In the village, their movements mirror the spirit of the land (Chowdhury et al., 2022). Beyond the festivities lies a more profound understanding of the Santal world. Feel the reverence for nature woven into their daily routines, with the gift of first fruits to Mother Earth serving as a silent witness to their strong bond with the land (Spradley, 2016).

Listen to the anxieties written on the faces of young adults hoping for a better future. Consider the challenges posed by climate change and environmental deterioration, which threaten the very underpinnings of their traditional way of life (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). However, the Santal spirit remains unwavering (see Box 1.2 for the relationship between Christianity and the Santal community). Their perseverance is shown in their unyielding quest for a better life, resolve to

maintain their cultural heritage, and unwavering trust in their community. Witness the community's struggle to adapt and evolve, using digital means to communicate their stories and campaign for their rights (Chowdhury et al., 2022).

Box 1.2 The Relationship Between Christianity and the Santal Community

The relationship between Christianity and the Santal community has been studied by scholars, who want to find out what happens when two different religions meet and how that changes the culture. *The Impact of Islam on Santal Society* by Hembrom (2018), *Religious Conversion Among the Santals: A Case Study of the Santal Christians in Jharkhand, India* by Murmu (2016), *Santal Religion and Christianity: A Comparative Study* by Tudu (2015), and *The Impact of Christianity on Santals in Bengal Presidency: A Historical Analysis* by Majhi (2013) are some of the important works that this chapter uses to explore the complex relationship between Christianity and the Santals. In his 2018 book, *Unveiling the Influence of Islam*, Hembrom talks about how Islam has had a huge effect on Santal society. He looks at how social structures, customs, and religious practices have changed in complex ways. This research shows how Islamic beliefs and the Santal way of life are constantly affecting each other. Murmu's (2016) case study on the experiences of Santal Christians in Jharkhand, India, sheds light on the reasons people became Christians, the problems they faced, and the life-changing paths they took. Their stories show how complicated it is for people in the Santal society to become religious. Tudu (2015) does a comparison study that looks at how the beliefs and lessons of Santal religion are alike and how they are different. This study gives us a more complete picture of how these two religions affect the lives of the Santals and affect each other. Majhi (2013) looks at history and focuses on how Christianity changed the lives of the Santals in Bengal Presidency. This study shows the long-lasting effects of Christian missions on the Santal community, looking at past factors and their effects on cultural, social, and religious areas. As of 2012, Soren has written a history study that shows how Santals and Christianity are connected. This chapter shows how the Santal community's relationship with Christianity has changed over time through past events, meetings, and experiences. Hembrom, Murmu, Tudu, Majhi, and Soren's writings give us useful information about the complicated connection between Christianity and the Santal people. The historical contexts, life-changing effects, and unique processes that have happened because of this religious meeting are emphasized in these works. By knowing these points where different cultures meet, we can better understand how Christianity fits into Santal society as a whole.

1.5.2 The Orang Asli

The Orang Asli people in Peninsular Malaysia are widely recognized as the original inhabitants of the region. The term “Orang Asli” translates to “first people” or “people of the land,” although the Malaysian government does not fully acknowledge them as Indigenous. The government’s goal is to assimilate the Orang Asli into the mainstream Malay-Muslim way of life, which is constitutionally designated as Indigenous (Ahmad et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2023; Dong et al., 2022; Mahmud et al., 2022). However, the Orang Asli have resisted and continue to preserve their traditional beliefs and cultural heritage. Islamization among the Orang Asli has been met with resistance, leading to a diverse religious and cultural landscape within the community. Issues such as land rights, access to education, healthcare, and the preservation of their traditional knowledge remain contentious, sparking efforts from civil society organizations, academics, and international bodies to advocate for Orang Asli rights (Inguanzo, 2024; Beng, 2022; Zubir & Wook, 2023). Despite these challenges, the Orang Asli are resilient in asserting their identity and fighting for their rights as Indigenous people in Malaysia. The ongoing sociopolitical changes in the country have not deterred the Orang Asli from preserving their unique cultural identities and asserting their rights within the broader framework of human and Indigenous peoples’ rights.

1.6 How to Use These Narratives?

In the field of social work, the complexities of religious conversion collide with power dynamics and institutional disparities, substantially altering people’s experiences. These processes manifest as unequal resource access, institutional discrimination, and conformity to dominant cultural norms. When working with Indigenous tribes such as Malaysia’s Orang Asli, social workers must navigate existing power dynamics and structural imbalances that may influence religious conversion decisions. This includes lobbying for the preservation of Indigenous spiritual practices and removing challenges to religious freedom. Through this effort, social workers hope to create justice in these communities. Understanding the relationship between religious conversion and other dimensions of identity, such as gender, race, and ethnicity, is critical for effective social work practice. Serving communities like the Orang Asli requires understanding how these factors interact with an individual’s conversion experience. By considering cultural norms, historical histories, and societal expectations, social workers can give nuanced support that respects an individual’s unique journey while addressing systemic injustices.

Recognizing the complexities of identity and religious views requires social workers to understand how conversion intersects with cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, and societal conventions. This comprehensive approach addresses the complexity of religious conversion while considering its interconnectedness with cultural

practices and ethnic backgrounds. Understanding an individual's religious views and conversion experiences requires careful consideration of gender relations. Recognizing how cultural norms and gender roles connect with religious conversion, particularly within groups like the Orang Asli, allows social workers to give comprehensive care that considers all aspects of an individual's identity. Ethnicity also influences the conversion process. Social workers must understand how cultural customs, historical events, and societal expectations about ethnicity influence people's decisions to convert. Social professionals can better support people navigating religious transformation by promoting a holistic approach that takes into account all parts of their ethnic identity.

Addressing the intersection of ethnicity (we read Indigenous) and religious conversion in social work necessitates a diverse strategy. We must speak out against structural injustices that perpetuate disparities, safeguarding traditional practices while pushing for social justice. Recognizing the complexities of crossing identities and individual conversion experiences enables social workers to provide meaningful support while keeping harmony among varied lived realities (Munshi, 2021; Debnath, 2020). Culturally competent interaction is critical for establishing respect by demonstrating true understanding of various cultural norms, values, and beliefs. Culturally competent social workers tailor their methods to meet individual requirements, advocate for equitable procedures, and treat all clients with respect (Singh et al., 2023). This requires close engagement with communities such as the Santal and Orang Asli. Honoring their customs and values fosters trust and leads to excellent outcomes. Continuous learning, cultural humility, and reflective supervision are critical for improving cultural competency in social workers. Adhering to established standards, soliciting feedback, and advocating for diversity all contribute to inclusive practice and meeting the different needs of the communities served. So, addressing these complications necessitates embracing diversity, promoting inclusivity, and respecting everyone's cultural backgrounds and views.

1.7 Organization of the Book

The book is organized into a seven-chapter, interconnected structure that provides a cohesive narrative. This introductory chapter, titled "Introduction and Motivation of the Book," functions as an intellectual gateway, disclosing the driving force that underpins this scholarly expedition. In Chap. 2, titled "Conceptualization and Existing Scholarship and Way of Seeing," an in-depth analysis of this viewpoint is presented. This includes an exploration of the archaeological examination of Indigenous cultures, the impact of nation-states, and the complex relationship between conversion, culturalism, colonization, and capitalism.

Chapter 3, titled "The Orang Asli Narratives and Visualizing the Orang Asli-ness Questioned," explores the intricate nature of Orang Asli identity and the profound and life-altering ramifications that ensue from embracing the faith. Chapter 4, titled "Conversion Narratives of the Santals: Edges with Visualization," examines the

resistance movements' resistance against British development endeavors and the fundamental belief that conversion served as a means of civilizing the populace. Chapter 5, titled "The Conversion in Indigenous Communities: Enhancing Social Work Practice Through Intersectionality, Cultural Competence, and Ethical Considerations," is conducted on the notion of intersectionality as it pertains to religious conversion. The critical significance of cultural competency in delivering sufficient assistance is underscored. The text examines the ethical considerations that social workers encounter and enhances comprehension through the use of scholarly case studies.

In Chap. 6, titled "Restoring, Rewriting and Re-Righting: An Ethnological/Comparative Appraisal," the authors scrutinize the prevailing power structures, scientific discourse, and developmental paradigms that are inherent in the field of social work. This study delves into the reclamation of heritage, the reestablishment of collective memory, and the rectitude of forgotten histories as they pertain to the Orang Asli and Santal communities. As a result, it presents a holistic strategy that aims to foster social harmony in both Malaysia and Bangladesh. The final chapter (Chap. 7), titled "Conclusion: 'Righting Wrong'—How Long?," underscores the importance of unity and self-reflection, providing concise overviews of significant discoveries and outlining possible directions for future scholarly investigation.

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Chapter 2

Conceptualization and Existing Scholarship and Way of Seeing



2.1 Introduction

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics inside Indigenous societies, including the Orang Asli in Malaysia and the Santals in Bangladesh, it is imperative to undertake a process of conceptualization and inquiry. This chapter serves as a fundamental component of our research undertaking, offering the essential theoretical, conceptual, and methodological underpinnings for our comprehensive exploration of Indigenous narratives in Bangladesh and Malaysia. The objective of this chapter is to critically analyze the concept of conversion as a means of establishing the legitimacy of scientific knowledge, with a particular focus on its impact on the formation of Indigenous identities and lived realities. This inquiry challenges prevailing historical narratives that have portrayed Indigenous peoples as “People Without History” (Wolf, 1982) or “sub-human,” emphasizing the imperative to critically reassess these prejudiced viewpoints. This investigation delves into the role of literature in facilitating a thorough comprehension of the Orang Asli and Santals, grounded in the principles of phenomenological inquiry, historical context, and ethical consciousness.

2.2 Why a Phenomenological Approach Is Best Suited

Conversion experiences weave intricate strands of personal transformation and social change throughout Indigenous cultures such as the Orang Asli and Santal. Understanding these enormous alterations necessitates a framework that explores the subjective depths of individual lives. Enter phenomenology, a study approach that is ideally suited to illuminating the “lifeworld”—the experienced reality—of

people undergoing conversion. Phenomenology's strengths resonate profoundly with the complexity of conversion among these societies.

Individual Interpretation of Conversion

Conversion is more than just a theological shift; it is a deeply personal journey shaped by individual histories, cultural nuances, and spiritual longing (van Manen, 2007, 2023). Unlike quantitative approaches, which avoid subjective experiences, phenomenology dives into personal narratives and introspective accounts (Husserl, 1964). This enables researchers to understand the distinct meanings and motivations driving conversion decisions in the Orang Asli and Santal contexts, avoiding broad generalizations that ignore cultural diversity and individual differences.

Respecting Subjectivity and Embracing Uniqueness

Each Santal or Orang Asli convert's journey is unique, affected by their cultural background, family relationships, and personal religious encounters. Phenomenology's emphasis on "bracketing" preexisting conceptions and embracing individual viewpoints (Giorgi, 2009) enables researchers to genuinely witness conversion through each individual's lens, recognizing the intrinsic diversity of experiences within these groups.

Capturing the Nuances of Lived Experience

Conversion is a dynamic process that occurs across emotional, social, and cultural landscapes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology's emphasis on analyzing lived experiences (Creswell, 2007) allows researchers to capture the varied nature of conversion among the Orang Asli and Santal, including its effects on identity, relationships, and communal interactions. This enables a more detailed understanding of how conversion interacts with social structures, cultural values, and individual goals within these cultures.

Bridging the Gap Between Researcher and Participant

Fostering sympathetic involvement and respectful connections with Orang Asli and Santal participants is critical to avoiding objectification or misrepresentation (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Phenomenology enables this collaborative approach by allowing researchers to co-create knowledge with persons who are undergoing conversion (Desjarlais & Jason Throop, 2011). This common journey promotes greater understanding and ensures that research findings appropriately reflect the reality of conversion in these communities.

Phenomenology offers a powerful approach to understanding religious conversion among the Orang Asli and Santal. It delves into the profoundly personal and context-specific nature of conversion experiences. By focusing on individual meaning-making, embracing subjectivity, and promoting collaboration with the people undergoing conversion, phenomenology sheds light on the unique journeys individuals navigate within their dynamic and diverse societies.

2.3 Conceptualization

2.3.1 Concept of Conversion

The Orang Asli, the Indigenous people of Malaysia, possess a rich cultural heritage that has been intertwined with the country's history for centuries. They are considered to be the original inhabitants of peninsular Malaysia and have a long-standing presence predating other ethnic groups. Comprising approximately 18 distinct ethnicities, each with their own unique traditions, languages, and ways of life, the

Orang Asli reflect immense diversity within Malaysian society. However, despite this uniqueness, they have often faced marginalization and impoverishment as well as persistent challenges such as undernutrition coupled with limited access to healthcare and education.

One noteworthy aspect integral in understanding these marginalized communities is their religious beliefs. The ongoing Christianization movement among some Muslim members within Perak state has raised concerns regarding its potential threat toward Islam being both the largest religion in Malaysia and an official one at the provincial level. This serves only to highlight how complex dynamics between religion impact cultural identity among the Orang Asli.

2.3.2 The Holy Trinity of Belief, Traditions, and Selfhood in the Enigmatic World of Conversion

The bond between faith, culture, and identity is deeply embedded within the Orang Asli community in Malaysia. As Indigenous people, they possess a rich cultural and spiritual heritage intricately woven into their traditional way of life (Ali, 2002). Their customs and beliefs hold great significance for their emotional and physical well-being, particularly through the role of Tok Biah, demonstrating the deep intertwining of faith and culture (Ali, 2002). Each Orang Asli clan or tribe has its own unique customs and ways of living, further highlighting the complex relationship between culture and identity within this community. One cannot understand an individual's sense of self without acknowledging their connection to both cultural roots and personal belief systems. This shapes every aspect of their being mentally, emotionally, and physically as evident in their daily practices and special ceremonies.

Religious phenomena operate within cultural conditions in local communities. Studying the invisible structure of belief and the visible structure of tradition can distinguish the interrelationship of religious conversion. The extent of traditional culture retention or adjustment reflects a community's reaction to a faith's teachings, exploring the relation between beliefs and traditions. Religious beliefs govern conduct in private and public spheres, reinforcing individual and community identity, and recognition of God as the source of truth, hope, and consolation (Hiebert et al., 2024; Marsden, 2022; Bowie, 2021; Luckmann et al., 2022; Schotte et al., 2022; Alexander et al., 2020).

When beliefs are transformed by faith, it does not necessarily mean abandoning cultural heritage. Conversion maintains connections to the old society but separates from the new society's beliefs, while transformation rejects cultural values and affirms the new faith's beliefs (Hilbert, 2020; Calderon Gomez, 2021; Dijkstra & Mäurer, 2024; Deguchi et al., 2020; Vieira et al., 2021; Costa-Jussà et al., 2022). Analyzing religious conversion requires examining the key elements of belief, traditions, and selfhood. Faith plays a crucial role in religious experiences, as individuals identify as followers, follow teachings, and adhere to guidance, repositioning themselves within the associated faith community.

2.3.3 *Archaeology of Indigenous*

Conversion experiences weave intricate strands of personal transformation and social change throughout Indigenous cultures like the Orang Asli and Santal. Understanding these profound changes requires a framework that explores the subjective depths of individual lives. Phenomenology, a research approach, is well suited to illuminating the “lifeworld”—the experienced reality—of people undergoing conversion (van Manen, 2023).

Phenomenology’s strengths resonate with the complexity of conversion in these societies. Conversion is more than just a theological shift; it is a deeply personal journey shaped by individual histories, cultural nuances, and spiritual longing (Husserl, 1964). Unlike quantitative methods that avoid subjective experiences, phenomenology dives into personal narratives and introspective accounts, enabling researchers to understand the distinct meanings and motivations driving conversion decisions in the Orang Asli and Santal contexts (Giorgi, 2009).

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While not without limitations, phenomenology provides an excellent lens to explore the extremely personal and context-dependent domain of conversion among the Orang Asli and Santal. By emphasizing individual meaning-making, accepting subjectivity, and encouraging collaboration, phenomenology exposes the unique journeys of individuals navigating complicated religious transformations within their dynamic and diverse societies.

2.3.4 *Nation-State and the Imagined Community*

Nation-states are often viewed as “imagined communities” with shared identity, history, and future (Anderson, 2006). However, this perspective may overlook the varied cultural environments within these countries, particularly the Indigenous groups whose identities and pasts may diverge from the prevailing narratives endorsed by the nation-state.

Indigenous communities in Bangladesh and Malaysia face difficulties in affirming their identities and safeguarding their cultural legacy due to the prioritization of specific ethnic or cultural groups in the countries' nation-building efforts. This section analyzes how myths and narratives promoted by the nation-state lead to the marginalization of Indigenous peoples and impede their attempts to achieve respect for their distinct cultural practices and histories.

The study examines the complexities of interactions between Indigenous groups and the state, as well as the ongoing efforts of Indigenous people to uphold their rights and identities within the nation-state structure. It emphasizes the significance of recognizing and respecting the varied cultural history of all communities within a nation-state and advocates for increased acknowledgment and safeguarding of Indigenous rights and identities.

Nation-states are complex entities influenced by common cultural and historical connections. Bangladesh and Malaysia have complex histories of establishment, characterized by struggles for autonomy and various ethnic populations. Indigenous populations, such as the Orang Asli and Santals, deal with intricate issues related to identity and belonging in nation-states, frequently encountering difficulties in representation, resource distribution, and cultural conservation.

State policies can impact Indigenous identities, either by incorporating them or diminishing them, highlighting the importance of comprehending their effects on social cohesion and cultural conservation. Archaeological studies provide understanding of how nation-state ideologies align or differ from Indigenous identities, showcasing the complex relationships between state objectives, Indigenous stories, and academic research.

2.3.5 Conversion as Culturalism, Colonization, and Capitalism: Legitimizing Science Conversion

As a complex phenomenon, conversion is not solely a theological transformation, but is closely linked to broader societal influences. The primary characteristic of culturalism is the impact of conversion on the cultural framework of Indigenous civilizations (Smith, 2021).

Adoption of alternative beliefs and lifestyles by Indigenous individuals often leads to substantial changes within their original communities, including a gradual deterioration of traditional languages, customs, and ceremonies (Desjarlais & Jason Throop, 2011). This hegemony of the dominant culture raises concerns for the preservation of Indigenous cultural heritage.

Conversion has been used as a strategy of colonization, as a deliberate tactic to dismantle the social fabric of Indigenous communities, exploit their labor, and rationalize forced relocation (Gould et al., 2019). The Santal community in Bangladesh

has persistently resisted such external forces aiming to enforce religious conversion (Panich & Gonzalez, 2021).

The inclusion of capitalism emphasizes the underlying economic principles that drive conversion. Indigenous individuals often experience assimilation into broader economic systems prioritizing profit and resource exploitation, disrupting their customary subsistence approaches (Paley, 2016; Smith, 2021).

Furthermore, conversion serves as a technique for establishing the authenticity and validity of scientific information, with missionary activity playing a crucial role in transmitting scientific conceptions among Indigenous tribes, often accompanied by conversion efforts. This phenomenon of legitimization, as seen in the Orang Asli group in Malaysia, raises ethical concerns about the imposition of external knowledge frameworks onto Indigenous perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

2.4 Way of Gathering Narratives

2.4.1 *Primary Data: Oral History, Interview, Observation, and Field Note*

Indigenous narrative academic study requires careful and meticulous data collection to have a complete understanding. This section describes the painstaking and methodical approach to studying the Orang Asli community in Malaysia and the Santals in Bangladesh. Oral history, interviews, observational studies, and field note recording were chosen for their capacity to investigate Indigenous experiences and narratives (Howitt, 2019).

Oral history, a traditional method of sharing cultural knowledge and historical tales via spoken communication, provides unique and significant insight into the rich cultural fabric of the Indigenous communities (Howitt, 2019). Structured interviews, known for their methodical approach and well-designed questions, directly engage Indigenous people and illuminate the complexities of their lives (Silverman & Patterson, 2021). Immersive engagement and participant observation provide a deep understanding of Orang Asli and Santal's everyday life (Aurini et al., 2021). An ethnographic framework helps develop a deep and empathetic understanding of their experiences. Field notes, systematic observation and reflective analysis, complement the data collection methods by preserving subtleties, contextual signals, and personal perspectives (Hennink et al., 2020).

The study focused on Orang Asli communities in Banding Lake, Perak, Malaysia, where 50% of the villages are Muslim, and the remaining communities are Christian. The researchers visited Kerak local, a predominantly Muslim community, where they met with the local leader and distributed presents to build a relationship, enhancing the quality and comprehensiveness of the acquired data.

2.4.2 Initiative on Reciprocal Research

The study used a reciprocal method by providing gifts like toys, coloring pencils, and notebooks to the Indigenous youths. Villagers helped with the distribution to overcome linguistic hurdles and ensure a seamless operation. Boys were given balls, while females received dolls, as well as small cars, candy, children's glasses, and educational materials. Parents' positive input, their enthusiastic caring for their children, and their willingness to seek help when necessary highlight the importance of this mutual exchange in building a good relationship and aiding the research process.

2.4.3 Engaging into the Santal Village

Bangladesh is made up of many old ethnic groups living together, with more than 54 known as Indigenous groups. They live with the main Bengali population, making up about 2% of the country's total population (Chowdhury, 2016). The 2011 census found that 11.1% of Bangladesh's people, or 1,586,141 people, are from different ethnic groups. The Santals make up 8.96% of the country's national population and 0.09% of its total people, with about 143,425 Santal people living in different parts of Bangladesh, mostly in the northern part of the country.

As the main researcher and author, the data for this study was personally gathered from four places of Rajshahi City that are next to each other (a comprehensive understanding of Christian mission at Rajshahi is shown in Box 2.1), conducted through in-depth talks with all the heads of families using a broad questionnaire from January 2019 to 2022. The ethnographic study was done with Santal families living in four different areas on the edges of cities in Rajshahi: (1) Mahisbatan and (2) Tallypara.

Box 2.1 Christian Mission

The Christian Mission Hospital at Rajshahi was established in 1887. Dr. Elizabeth Conan reconstructed the hospital in 1950 by including all privileges of medical treatment for Christian and non-Christian people. Dr. Upendranath Malakar and his wife Dr. Mina Malakar were renowned doctors, who served this institution for several decades with high reputation and expertise in gynecology. Dr. Upendranath Malakar and Dr. Mina Malakar first established this nursing institute in the name of Dr. Elizabeth Conan. The Sick Centre is located at Dingadoba Mission Campus, which provides full facilities for sick Santals coming for treatment in Rajshahi. The English missionary people initially established a primary school at Hetem Khan, which was later shifted to the Haragram area near the Court, and it was turned into a full-fledged high school for both boys and girls. At present, this school has about 1000 students, mostly from the Bengali Muslim community.

Karim (2012, p. 36).

There were 23 modified Santals that were looked at, but that number was not limited for case studies and/or interviews. From 2019 to 2022, the field work was done in Bhutan's five plateaus. The data in this book came from two places of Rajshahi city that are next to each other. The Santal people in Rajshahi are the only ones studied in this study. They do not represent the whole country's Santal people. However, the inception of Christianity in Santal has been a growing concern. Mrinal Debnath also said, "[t]he emergence of a new nation state did not bring about any changes in educating the vulnerable Indigenous peoples living on the edge of cultural, linguistic and economic extinction. In rural settings such as Palashpur, the government, NGOs and Christian missions have started imposing an exclusionary system of education on the Santal and other Indigenous peoples" (Debnath, 2020, p.4).

2.5 When We Are "Outsiders Within": The Axiological Concern of the Study

From what we know, the idea of the "outsider within" (Collins, 1999a) means that experts like us interact with groups that are not similar to our own. It requires us to walk a fine line between following the community's beliefs and traditions and listening to their stories with cultural awareness and understanding. In this way, we encourage real study, honesty, and moral participation (Collins, 1986; Narayan, 1993). We had the chance to study the Orang Asli in Malaysia and the Santal in Bangladesh, which made us think about our own lives as "outsiders within." Because of our (all authors are Indigenous) cultural past,¹ we know we are outsiders, but we try to study in a way that makes us feel like we are insiders through immersion and empathy. We learned how important it is to be humble, listen carefully, and follow the cultural norms and traditions of the people we work with through our study. We have learned that cultivating trust and openness needs a slow and careful method (Collins, 1999a; b). Our experience has also shown us how important it is to do the study in a decent way. We strongly believe in joint knowledge production, in which the views of the community are taken into account to make sure that their experiences are accurately portrayed. According to Sumon (2022) and Debnath (2023), the most important things for us in our work are cultural awareness, social involvement, and cooperative knowledge acquisition. Most importantly, we have a social duty to value the points of view of the groups we interact with and prioritize reciprocity.

From an axiological point of view, cultural humility is very important to us. Axiological diversity teaches us to be humble and respectful when dealing with different sets of values (Busatta & Casonato, 2021). We try to be very humble, knowing that our own cultural point of view has its limits. We strongly believe in the

¹These are personal experiences of the first author and second author.

ideas of learning from each other and sharing what you know (Wasik, 2019). Our goal in doing our research is to be academically rigorous and responsible while also respecting the ethnic identities and stories of the people we study. Being an “Outsider within” means having a thoughtful approach that encourages cultural respect, reciprocity, and learning from each other (Collins, 1986). By doing things this way, we hope to help people learn more about the Orang Asli and Santal societies and, in the end, improve how they are represented and tell their stories.

2.5.1 Locating the Indigenous in the Western Philosophy: Are They “People Without History” and “Sub-human”?

When you look at Indigenous societies through the lens of Western thought, you find a very troubled past. There is a lot of bias, which shows up in the damaging labels of “people without history” and “sub-human” for Indigenous people (Wolf, 1982; Uddin, 2022). Hegel and others perpetuated the idea that Indigenous people didn’t have any political power or responsibility (Wolf, 1982). At the same time, calling them “sub-human” (Uddin, 2022) confirmed that they were thought to be less important, which allowed for their colonial abuse and dehumanization (Winter, 2021; Cottingham, 2021). Georg Hegel pushed the idea that the “People of Asia and Africa are sub-human, illogical, and having no history.” This meant that Native American groups didn’t have any control over history and didn’t make many additions to the progress of human culture. At the same time, this part challenges the idea that the Orang Asli and Santal people are “people without history” and “sub-human,” in order to restore their rich cultural heritage. This damaging heritage, shown by words like “sub-human” (Uddin, 2022), comes from Western ontological frameworks that push the global South and Indigenous communities to the margins. This study aims to break down these damaging narratives by using an ethnographic method that emphasizes the Orang Asli and Santal peoples’ perspectives and lived experiences. Thankfully, new research provides a much-needed critical reevaluation (Tilzey et al., 2023). Indigenous scholars, anthropologists, and postcolonial philosophers have shown that these historical accounts aren’t accurate and have emphasized the important cultural, historical, and intellectual contributions of these groups (Tilzey et al., 2023). In his writings, Vine Deloria Jr., for example, disproved the idea that Indigenous people don’t have deep knowledge systems or cosmologies. This study builds on this critical approach. Its goal is to restore the heritage of the Orang Asli and Santal peoples and fight against how they are unfairly portrayed in Western thought. We can try to “right the things” instead of “righting the wrongs” (Spivak, cited in Tilzey et al., 2023) by giving their perspectives and lived experiences more attention. The goal is to fill in the gaps in the existing literature, tear down harmful narratives, and finally rewrite the story that Western thought uses to dehumanize Indigenous people.

2.6 Conclusion

Chapter 2 explored the complicated environment of comprehending Indigenous cultures from a critical perspective. We investigated the historical biases entrenched in Western philosophical frameworks, which frequently depicted them as “people without history” and “sub-human.” This chapter addressed these detrimental notions by looking at archaeological evidence, nation-state development, and the role of conversion as an instrument for cultural subordination and economic growth. We also recognized the limitations of legal structures, which often fail to accommodate the specific needs and realities of Indigenous people. We emphasized the necessity of gathering and amplifying Indigenous perspectives and lived experiences using a phenomenological methodology. This chapter laid the groundwork for the future stages of our journey, in which we will engage closely with the Orang Asli and Santal communities, acknowledging my role as an “outsider within” but adhering to ethical and axiological norms. Finally, the chapter’s central theme is the crucial need to decolonize our knowledge systems and recover Indigenous communities’ narratives. By focusing on their voices, we can work toward a more fair and equitable future that acknowledges their unique cultural legacy, history, and contributions to the world.

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Chapter 3

The Orang Asli Narratives and Visualizing the Orang Asli-ness Questioned



3.1 Introduction: We Have Names

The Orang Asli community in Malaysia is made up of more than 18 different Indigenous groups, each with its own unique history and cultural identity (Endicott, 1979). However, these communities are sometimes grouped together as “Orang Asli,” which conceals their uniqueness and suppresses their perspectives. The chapter resists the erasure by claiming “We have names,” in line with Youngling’s plea to honor Indigenous self-identification. The story criticizes the usage of broad phrases, comparing it to dehumanizing labels such as “Native American”. This process of homogeneity sustains colonial power dynamics and dispossession. Instead, a pluralistic approach that embraces the diversity of Orang Asli communities is recommended by Siegel (2023). “We Have Names” goes beyond storytelling to serve as a manifesto, advocating for the acknowledgment of the unique identities and stories of the Orang Asli. The chapter promotes the breakdown of power structures and the reclaiming of self-definition and representation. Several organizations in Malaysia, including (Daut, 2023) and many organizations aid these endeavors through research, lobbying, and capacity-building projects. This chapter, in effect, the book, focuses on addressing issues such as land rights, education, healthcare, cultural preservation, and women’s empowerment to empower Orang Asli communities and protect their cultural heritage. Exploring the dialectic between individuality and shared experience uncovers the concept of “Orang Asli-ness,” which holds significant historical, political, and cultural ramifications. We aim to explore the intricate aspects of Orang Asli identity in the face of contemporary difficulties (Siegel, 2023). This chapter highlights the relevance of names in comprehending the diverse identity of the Orang Asli group, while stressing the value of preserving their cultural heritage in the face of changing circumstances and developmental challenges. Our exploration begins within the framework of the dialectic between individuality and shared experience. At the core of our investigation is the notion of

“Orang Asli-ness,” a construct that carries significant historical, political, and cultural implications. Harvey Seigel nicely said,

I argue as well for a pluralistic approach to argument evaluation and argumentative norms, since arguments and argumentation can be legitimately evaluated along several dimensions, but urge that epistemic norms enjoy conceptual priority.

Siegel, (2023, p. 465)

Our objective is to reveal the complex dimensions of Orang Asli identity within the context of the modern world. This chapter aims to underscore the importance of names in comprehending the complex identity of the Orang Asli community, while highlighting the imperative of safeguarding their cultural heritage amid changing environments and developmental challenges.

3.2 Conversion Creates Duality: Some Narratives

3.2.1 Case 1: *Broken Bondage*

In candid interviews with converted Orang Asli people, their voices reflect the anguish of broken bonds and fractured identities after conversion. One anonymous man reflects, “When I accepted Islam, I believed I was strengthening my faith and connecting to a larger community. However, I found myself estranged from my own people. They regarded me as a traitor, someone who had abandoned our ancestral traditions.”

Similarly, a woman describes her struggle, saying,

After converting, I hoped to find acceptance and belonging among other Muslims. However, I quickly realized that I was neither fully accepted by my old community nor seamlessly integrated into the majority Malay-Muslim society. I felt as if I was caught between two worlds, belonging to neither.

Community leaders, speaking on behalf of their converted constituents, acknowledge a deep sense of loss and disconnection.

“Our people are being torn apart by conversion,” laments one leader. “We see our brothers and sisters leave, seeking solace in a religion that opposes our Indigenous practices. It’s heart breaking to see our cultural heritage eroded and our community fragmented.”

These first-hand accounts paint a moving picture of the emotional turmoil experienced by Orang Asli people following conversion. They struggle with the profound consequences of their decision, feeling displaced and yearning for a reconciliation that may never come. In the case of Orang Asli conversion to Islam, some anonymous converted Orang Asli individuals, including community leaders, claim that the conversion has severed ties with their ancestral community. According to their statements, after converting to Islam, they felt excluded from their old community because they were no longer accepted as members. They also mention a lack of integration with Malaysia’s Muslim majority population. When investigating the

theme of broken bondage among converted Orang Asli individuals, literature on conversion narratives and social relationship dynamics can be useful. Shinn et al. (2018) investigates the psychological and social implications of religious conversion, shedding light on the complexities of identity transformation and the difficulties of navigating new social landscapes. Research conducted by Srivastava (2005), Molfenter (2021), Samonova (2019), and Derks (2010) on bonded labor and slavery compares with the Orang Asli persons' encounters after conversion, emphasizing power relations, control, and social isolation. Bland's (1999) examination of narrative structure in slave narratives provides understanding of how people manage their identities in the face of societal oppression. The works provide light on the emotional distress and existential dilemmas experienced by Orang Asli persons who have converted, leading them to feel alienated from their ancestral customs and previous community. Converting to Islam can greatly change religious views and social connections, possibly causing a perceived break with their previous society. It is important to acknowledge that these experiences differ among individuals and communities, shaped by factors such as personal experiences and communal attitudes.

3.2.2 Case 2: Lost Language

Let us start with some verbatim statements from interviews.

Since embracing Islam, our community has seen a noticeable decrease in the use of our Indigenous language. It's not just a matter of speaking Malay more frequently; it's a gradual abandonment of our native tongue. Our conversations, rituals, and daily interactions have shifted to Malay.

The younger generation hardly communicates in our native language anymore. Our language is fading into obscurity as education is primarily conducted in Malay, and Malay has an increasing influence in media and popular culture. It is disheartening to see a fundamental aspect of our cultural identity being eroded.

Ethnographic Observations

Community gatherings, which were once vibrant with Indigenous languages, now primarily feature conversations and speeches delivered in Malay, indicating the language's growing dominance. Younger generations' proficiency in their native language has declined significantly, with many expressing difficulties understanding or participating in conversations in their ancestral tongue.

The conversion of Orang Asli people to Islam has resulted in a multifaceted process of language loss in the community, as documented by verbatim accounts and ethnographic observations. The widespread use of Malay in religious, educational, and social contexts has marginalized Indigenous languages, resulting in a decline in their usage and transmission. Ethnographic observations and scholarly literature show that religious conversion has a significant impact on language usage among the Orang Asli. Grenoble and Whaley (2021) discuss how the spread of Islam has

resulted in a significant decline in the use of Indigenous languages, with Malay becoming the dominant language in many aspects of daily life. McIvor (2020) emphasizes the generational impact of language loss among Orang Asli, particularly among youth, as a result of Malay's widespread influence in educational institutions and media platforms. Jacob (2012) emphasizes the evolution of religious practices, with traditional forms of worship in Indigenous languages being gradually replaced by Malay equivalents. These findings support McKenzie's and Austin's (2022) observations of a shift toward Malay dominance in community gatherings and ceremonies. Warner (1999) also points out that younger generations are losing proficiency in their native language, exacerbating the threat of language loss and cultural erosion. This loss of linguistic diversity endangers not only the survival of cultural heritage but also intergenerational communication and traditional knowledge preservation. As the Orang Asli deal with the implications of religious conversion for their identities, language loss emerges as a poignant manifestation of the profound changes that are reshaping their community dynamics. It emphasizes the intricate interplay of religion, language, and cultural identity, emphasizing the importance of collaborative efforts to preserve linguistic diversity and promote cultural resilience within Indigenous communities.

3.2.3 Case 3: *One Edge to Another: Discrimination*

Verbatim Statements from Field Observations

Orang Asli Man: "I thought converting to Islam would bring me closer to society, but it only pushed me further to the margins." My own group considers me a sell-out, while the Malays regard me as an outsider. "I'm stuck in the middle, belonging nowhere."

Orang Asli Woman: "Every time I step into a job interview, I feel judged. They notice my traditional dress and accent and decide I'm not eligible. It's as if they've already determined I'm not worth their time."

Group discussion: "We are invisible to the authorities. They discuss 'national unity,' but we are never included in that discourse. Our difficulties are irrelevant to them because we do not meet their definition of a 'model citizen.'"

An elderly Orang Asli: "I recall when our land was taken away for development." They promised compensation, but we are still waiting. It's as if they believe we don't deserve same rights as everyone else.

Young Orang Asli: "We are taught in school to be proud of our culture, yet when we leave, we are treated as if we are inferior. It's confusing: should we embrace or hide who we are in order to fit in?"

Field Observations

Despite efforts to integrate, Orang Asli Muslims continue to endure prejudice and marginalization in both their communities and mainstream society. Economic prospects are few, with Orang Asli people being neglected for job and educational chances due to institutional prejudices. The media spreads preconceptions and misunderstandings about Orang Asli

Muslims, aggravating social exclusion and discrimination. Political representation and legal protection are absent, making Orang Asli communities susceptible to abuse and disenfranchisement.

Individual Orang Asli tales reveal a varied experience of discrimination, including marginalization in both their Indigenous groups and mainstream Malaysian culture. This phenomenon, known as “one edge to another,” highlights the complexities of identity negotiation and the difficulties marginalized groups confront in managing cultural expectations. Recent research, such as that of Grenoble and Whaley (2021), emphasizes the intersectionality of discrimination against Orang Asli Muslims, demonstrating the compounding impacts of religious and ethnic marginalization. McIvor (2020) investigates the generational effects of systemic prejudice, demonstrating how persistent preconceptions and structural inequities perpetuate marginalization across age groups. These observations are consistent with the results of McKenzie (2022) and Austin (2022), who record the ubiquitous nature of prejudice in different aspects of Orang Asli people’s life, including employment and political representation. Warner (1999) examines the psychological toll of prejudice, providing light on the emotional and mental health repercussions of systematic marginalization. The situation is like this *One Edge to Another: Discrimination*—which illustrates the multifaceted realities of Orang Asli people, demonstrating the interlocking layers of oppression and marginalization they face. This narrative highlights the lasting impact of colonialism on Indigenous communities and underscores the complex interplay between cultural discrimination and environmental injustices. Drawing on Beckwith (2019), Badaan and Jost (2020), and O’Neill (2003), the narrative shown in Box 3.1 elucidates the pronounced discrepancies between the Orang Asli and dominant populations, emphasizing the need for sophisticated strategies to address discrimination effectively.

Box 3.1 Case of Rahim (Name Changed)

I am Rahim, a member of Malaysia’s Orang Asli community, and I like to discuss our challenges with discrimination following our conversion to Islam. We anticipated that our conversion would promote acceptance, but unfortunately, we encountered prejudice both internally and externally. We felt ostracized and rejected by our former group, viewed as traitors. Discrimination continued in society, with us being seen as inferior citizens and experiencing insults and unjust treatment due to our race and religion. The government and public services neglected us, thus solidifying our feeling of being unseen. Despite these obstacles, we came together as a community, insisting on respect and decency. Despite certain advancements, the battle against discrimination persists. We are determined to speak up, forming alliances and promoting a future without discrimination. As converted Orang Asli, we directly challenge prejudice and refuse to be passive victims. We shall continue our pursuit of justice and equality, committed to establishing a society where all individuals are treated equitably.

Furthermore, the utilization of Antonovsky's (1960) framework underscores that discrimination is not solely an individual occurrence but a societal phenomenon with profound psychological and societal implications.

3.2.4 Case 4: Impact on Social Organizations, Institutions: Family, Marriage

When I accepted Islam, I expected it to bring me closer to my community, but instead I felt rejected and marginalized by people who had previously welcomed me. It's devastating to be rejected by my own people.

(Sara, Female, Age 28)

I never anticipated my decision to convert to Islam to result in such hatred from my family and friends. "I feel like I'm walking on eggshells, afraid to express my opinions for fear of being judged."

(Ahmad, Male, Age 35)

Every day in society, I experience discrimination. People gaze and speak behind my back, regarding me as a curiosity. It's exhausting to keep proving myself.

(Fatimah, Female, Age 30)

Even in official institutions, I am considered as a second-class citizen due to my race and faith. My needs are being overlooked in favor of the majority.

(Rahim, Male, Age 40)

Discrimination is not only overt; it also manifests itself in the subtle ways in which others treat me because of my heritage. It's an ongoing struggle to be treated with decency.

(Zainab, female, Age 33)

Though quiet, Orang Asli community gatherings are tense, particularly between Muslims and non-Muslims. These confrontations often occur in various groups during events, revealing a deeper social divide. Theological differences sometimes spark heated debates and isolation. This resentment causes division and weakens communal togetherness. Due to opposing religious concepts if we learn from scholars such as Simpson (2017), Bugge (2020), Orang Asli family, conversions to Islam may generate severe conflict. Religious debates may strain family relationships and cause emotional discomfort (see Box 3.2). Directly seeing these encounters shows that different viewpoints may cause family strife. Children participating in these fights may feel pulled between competing loyalties, complicating family connections and weakening bonding. Converted people may feel socially excluded. They may feel lonely and isolated due to glances, murmured comments, and social isolation. These experiences may exacerbate self-consciousness and inadequacy, making it hard for converted people to integrate into society and make meaningful bonds. These anthropological studies show that converted Orang Asli people face prejudice in many aspects of their lives, from village interactions to wider social institutions. This raw data shows the urgent need for concerted action to end systemic inequality

and discrimination, defend disadvantaged communities' rights and well-being, and create a more inclusive and equitable society. The studies collectively depict an intricate view of the systemic oppression experienced by the converted Orang Asli. They emphasize the significance of self-determination and community-driven solutions in tackling these difficulties.

Box 3.2 Case of Aisha (Name Changed)

My name is Aisha, and I am from a close-knit Orang Asli family in Malaysia. Our lives altered tremendously when some of our family members decided to convert to Islam. The choice caused a significant upheaval in our family dynamics, resulting in rifts and divides that we never dreamed conceivable. One of the most difficult elements of this transition has been the rift among our own family. Growing up, our family was bonded by our cultural customs and values. We commemorated our history with rites and ceremonies passed down through generations. But since the changeover, everything seems different. Some of us have fully accepted Islam, while others have opted to keep onto our Indigenous traditions. The animosity between these two groups is tangible, and it is splitting our family apart. Family reunions, which were once joyous times full of laughter and camaraderie, now feel tense and unpleasant. Conversations eventually drift to religious differences, leaving a sense of discomfort in the air. Instead of joining together to appreciate our common heritage, we find ourselves bickering about faith and tradition. It's as if our family has split into two independent entities, traveling in divergent paths.

However, the influence of our conversion goes beyond our personal family. Our extended families, who formerly gave us a sense of belonging and support, now feel like strangers. We used to get together on a regular basis for weddings, birthdays, and other important occasions, but these events now serve as painful reminders of our family's differences. It's as if we're living in two different planets, unable to cross the distance between us. As much as I attempt to understand and empathize with my family members who have accepted Islam, I can't help but feel a feeling of loss. Our Indigenous traditions and rituals are firmly engrained in who we are as a people, and it's distressing to watch them go away. I'm concerned about the future of our family and community, and whether we'll ever be able to find common ground again. Finally, our conversion to Islam has had a significant and far-reaching influence on our family. It has broken up relationships, frayed friendships, and left us feeling disconnected and lost. Despite the upheaval, I am hopeful that one day we will be able to resolve our differences and reunite as a family once more.

3.2.5 Case 5: Seeing Hegelian “Actual Mind” in Malaysian Forest

In our investigation of the relationship between Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s philosophical conceptions and Malaysian forest-dwelling cultures, we dispute Hegel’s classification of Asian and African peoples as “illogical” or “subhuman” as asserted by Nasir Uddin’s work. This sophisticated perspective is backed by current research. For example, Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* offers insights on historical philosophical structures (Solomon, 2023; Brandom, 2019). Simpson (2017), on the other hand, attacks imperialist viewpoints on Indigenous rationality, emphasizing Hegelian frameworks’ limits. Similarly, Smith (2021) proposes decolonizing approaches to validate multiple knowledge systems, which is consistent with our findings. Our investigation reveals societies that transcend Hegel’s dichotomies, demonstrating logic and consistency in their everyday activities. Chowdhury et al. (2024) conducted recent study on Indigenous resiliency and environmental stewardship, which is consistent with these findings. Furthermore, while Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* sheds light on the idea of the “Actual Mind” (Solomon, 2023), current academics such as Weaver (2015) emphasize the significance of acknowledging various rationalities and social interactions. Finally, our findings challenge Eurocentric assumptions, providing insights into alternate modalities of human flourishing based on context-specific knowledge and communal well-being.

Hegel’s “Actual Mind” must be placed within his wider philosophical framework while researching Malaysian forest communities and Hegelian philosophy (see Box 3.3). In his seminal work *Philosophy of History*, Hegel portrays Asian and African peoples as “illogical” or “subhuman” thinkers. Recent scholars like Robert Brandom have attacked Hegel’s views, highlighting the need to rethink them in light of current analytic philosophy (Brandom, 2019). Observations among Malaysian forest communities challenge Hegel’s reductionist narratives. According to Linda,

Box 3.3 Hegelian Idea

This observation investigates observations made on the Hegelian idea of the “Actual Mind” and its application to Malaysian Indigenous forest communities. It questions Hegel’s characterization of Asian and African people as irrational and subhuman, emphasizing the logical and relational parts of their cognition. In his work *Philosophy of History*, Hegel made contentious claims about the illogical character of Asian and African peoples. Furthermore, in his *Encyclopedia*, he stated that the “Actual Mind” was predominantly associated with German culture. This case study looks at observations collected in Malaysian forest communities that contradict Hegel’s ideas and demonstrate logical and relational reasoning. The residents in the renovated villages displayed a rational thinking as well as virtues of hospitality and human decency. Their manner of thought and approach to both people and environment were

distinct. Despite some limits and difficulties, they preserve their own medicine systems and thrive via community rituals. Notably, they practice “commoning” inside their society, demonstrating trust and cooperation between themselves. They created a circular economy and a sustainable model that encourages common trading networks based on oral and traditional customs.

Contrary to Hegel’s arguments, observations in Malaysian forest tribes call into question the idea that Asian and African people lack reasoning. These cultures’ approaches to social organization, resource management, and community engagement reflect a rational worldview. Their capacity to create and sustain their own pharmaceutical systems, circular economies, and sustainable models demonstrates their logical reasoning and flexibility. Furthermore, the community behaviors and collaborative decision-making processes inside these communities demonstrate a relational perspective. They value collaboration, trust, and the well-being of the community as a whole, emphasizing the interconnection of individuals and their surroundings. This relational perspective contrasts with Hegel’s portrayal of Asian and African people as devoid of individual activity and reason.

Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies*, these cultures exist with a logic and reason that transcends colonialism (Smith, 2021). Solomon’s interpretation of Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* helps us understand human awareness and agency by revealing these communities’ cognitive processes (Solomon, 2023).

3.2.6 Photovoice

Photovoice, a novel methodology for participatory research, has been recognized as a powerful instrument for Indigenous people to articulate their unique viewpoints, lived encounters, and future ambitions (Jarldorn, 2018; Sutton-Brown, 2014).

Jarldorn (2018) emphasizes the significant contribution of photovoice (Fig. 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5) and depicts the “subhuman” in enhancing the resilience of Indigenous communities, particularly in the post-disaster context. Through the process of documenting their lived experiences, Indigenous communities could provide valuable insights into their unique needs and views. This, in turn, can have a significant influence on the formation of policies and decision-making processes that directly affect their overall well-being. There are several organizations and initiatives that are dedicated to supporting and advocating for the rights and well-being of the Orang Asli communities in Malaysia. Some of these organizations are listed in Box 3.4.



Fig. 3.1 This is a witness of a modernizing project of a Hydraulic electric dam in the 1960s; the Community is over the side, on the hill



Fig. 3.2 The village, the situation of the converted Orang Asli



Fig. 3.3 The village, the situation of the converted Orang Asli



Fig. 3.4 The meeting place



Fig. 3.5 The condition of the forestalls of the converted people's situations

Box 3.4 Organizations Supporting the Rights and Well-Being of the Orang Asli Communities

1. *Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC)*

COAC is an independent organization that focuses on promoting and protecting the rights of the Orang Asli. They engage in research, advocacy, and capacity-building programs to address issues related to land rights, education, healthcare, and cultural preservation.

2. *Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS)*

JOAS is a national network of Indigenous peoples' organizations in Malaysia, including representatives from various Orang Asli communities. It works to empower and strengthen Indigenous peoples' organizations, advocates for their rights at the national and international levels, and promotes sustainable development for Indigenous communities.

3. *Malaysian Indigenous Peoples Alliance (AMAN Malaysia)*

4. *Orang Asli Education Network (OAEN)*

OAEN is an organization that focuses on improving access to quality education for Orang Asli children and youth. They provide educational support, advocate for inclusive and culturally sensitive education policies, and collaborate with schools and communities to enhance educational opportunities. These organizations, among others, play crucial roles in raising awareness, providing support, and advocating for the rights of the Orang Asli communities. They work toward empowering the communities, preserving their cultural heritage, and addressing the systemic challenges they face.

In this study, Tremblay et al. (2018) provide a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of photovoice as a powerful tool for showcasing the intrinsic qualities and resilience exhibited by Indigenous communities. The utilization of this participatory approach serves to commemorate cultural practices, traditions, and knowledge systems that have demonstrated resilience over an extended period, so shedding light on the unwavering essence of Indigenous cultures. The value of photovoice extends beyond basic depiction, as it serves as a powerful means of communication and advocacy (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). By actively engaging in the sharing of their visual narratives, Indigenous communities can effectively counter assumed assumptions and fight entrenched prejudices. By engaging in such actions, individuals not only cultivate an environment of shared comprehension and admiration but also challenge the existing societal norms, so paving the way for enhanced inclusiveness and a deeper appreciation of many cultures.

3.3 Uniting Through Dividing: We Need to Address the Reality and Brotherhood Feelings

3.3.1 *Social Sustenance System*

Our traditional understanding of the land and environment has served us well for centuries. It's critical to our community's survival and well-being.

(An Orang Asli elder person)

Colonial interventions in social service have often overlooked our cultural values and practices, leading to feelings of alienation and disempowerment.

(Community Leader of the Orang Asli community)

Our cultural legacy is inextricably linked to our relationship with the earth. Preserving our traditions is more than just surviving; it is about honoring our forefathers and safeguarding our children's future.

(An Orang Asli activist)

We want social services that recognize our own cultural context and empower us to face our own difficulties. Outsider-led efforts frequently miss the target and exacerbate reliance.

(Orang Asli activist)

Climate change has far-reaching consequences for our communities. We must listen to indigenous perspectives and incorporate traditional knowledge into adaptation efforts to ensure long-term resilience.

(An Orang Asli expert)

The difficulty for Orang Asli communities is to preserve social sustenance systems in the face of external pressures and internal discord. Drawing on Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices is critical for building unity and resilience in these communities (Barnhardt & Oscar Kawagley, 2005). Traditional knowledge preservation, such as ecological understandings and sustainable resource management, can help communities achieve self-determination (Cajete, 1999). However, the colonial past of social work has frequently perpetuated marginalization and

disempowerment of Indigenous peoples, emphasizing the importance of culturally competent and decolonized methods to social services (Czyzewski & Tester, 2014; Weaver, 1999). Furthermore, addressing the mental well-being of Orang Asli people is critical for developing communal relationships and increasing collective resilience (Iberahim, 2020). Efforts to improve environmental social work education and integrate Indigenous knowledge systems into curriculum development will help Orang Asli communities handle environmental issues and promote sustainability (Masoga & Shokane, 2019). Furthermore, including Indigenous voices and views into climate change adaptation plans is critical to ensure Orang Asli communities' resilience in the face of environmental risks (Shaffril et al., 2020; Tsing, 2020). Orang Asli communities can use inclusive and participatory community development initiatives to overcome divides and foster a sense of communal identity and belonging. By respecting Indigenous knowledge, boosting cultural resilience, and addressing structural disparities, these communities may handle problems while maintaining their legacy and increasing social cohesion (Long et al., 2018; Simpong et al., 2018).

3.3.2 Education as Elimination

Centering Indigenous perspectives and aspirations is crucial in the process of decolonizing educational processes. This necessitates a comprehensive reassessment of educational methodologies, with a focus on acknowledging and incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledge significantly influences the educational experiences and well-being of Indigenous communities (Smith, 2021). Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work highlights the importance of research methods that question Western frameworks and genuinely incorporate Indigenous viewpoints while honoring Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Sleeter and Carmona support moving toward a non-standardized curriculum, emphasizing the significance of multicultural education to address the needs of students from various backgrounds. Language revitalization activities are crucial for safeguarding cultural heritage since language acts as a channel for traditional knowledge and cultural pride (Tuck & Yang, 2021). Tuck and Yang advocate for concrete decolonization efforts that go beyond symbolism, promoting the dismantling of repressive systems and the redistribution of power to Indigenous communities. Marie Battiste emphasizes incorporating Indigenous knowledge into educational systems, recognizing the unique ways of knowing and teaching in Indigenous societies (Battiste, 2002). Tuck and Yang propose the use of "R-words" to advocate for research and education that support Indigenous autonomy and self-determination, emphasizing the need for decolonization (Tuck & Yang, 2014). The works emphasize the importance of decolonizing education by using inclusive techniques that respect Indigenous viewpoints and support cultural preservation and empowerment.

3.3.3 *Language Lost*

I grew up speaking our native tongue, but as I became older, I realized that fewer young people were acquiring it. Now, most talks take place in Malay, and I'm concerned that our language may be gone forever.

(Raj, Male, Age 45)

It's heartbreaking to see my children struggle to connect with their grandparents, especially when language plays such a vital role in cultural identity. Losing that connection can feel like losing a piece of my heritage.

(Siti, Female, Age 35)

Ethnographic Observations

Traditional languages are rapidly disappearing in Orang Asli tribes. Younger generations mostly speak Malay, the official language, pushing indigenous languages to the background. During community meetings and social occasions, talks among the elderly frequently transition between Malay and indigenous languages, emphasizing the generational gap in language skill. Children have a poor comprehension of indigenous languages and communicate mostly in Malay. The lack of official language education programs exacerbates this trend, thereby reducing linguistic variety in Orang Asli communities.

Some Statements from Interviews

We have begun language lessons for youngsters in our community to guarantee that our indigenous languages be passed down to future generations. It's a minor start, but we think it will assist to maintain our language history.

(Ali, Male, Age 38)

Our Cultural Centre hosts storytelling sessions and language courses to help revitalize our native languages. It's encouraging to see a growing interest among young people in studying our ancient languages.

(Zara, Female, Age 28)

Ethnographic Observations

Despite the fear of language extinction, several Orang Asli tribes have begun initiatives to revitalize indigenous languages. Cultural Centre and community leaders provide language lessons, storytelling sessions, and workshops to preserve and transmit native languages to future generations. These efforts instil a sense of pride and connection to cultural heritage in participants as they actively participate in language learning and preservation activities. While problems exist, such as limited finances and institutional support, grassroots initiatives by Orang Asli communities demonstrate resilience and resolve to preserve their language legacy for future generations.

The lost history of Malaysia's Orang Asli recalls a lineage marred by historical injustices, relocation, and industrialization. Their history, which is strongly rooted in ancestral regions, formerly thrived as a storehouse of cultural practices, spiritual rites, and the relationship to nature (Nobuta, 2007; Daut, 2023; Ali, 2024). Nur Daut's observation, based on empirical data, is very vital, and he calls for an open dialogue,

While Islam is the official religion, the Constitution allows other religions to be practiced peacefully by non-Malay Malaysians, namely the ethnic Chinese and Indians. However, the Islamic law that governs Muslim marriages in Malaysia has mandated that non-Muslims

must convert to Islam should they wish to marry Muslims. In this paper, I argue that the Islamic conversion law has been used as a tool to strengthen the sentiment of ethnic Malay nationalism in Malaysia. Preliminary data were collected based on interviews with Malay Muslims who are married to non-Malays. The results have shown that majority of Malay interviewees consider conversion to Islam as imperative as required by the Islamic religion and the state law. In addition, they also see no reason why non-Malays would object to converting to Islam, as upon marriage, the children will automatically be considered Malays as per the Constitution, which also comes with status and privileges. As being a Muslim is associated with being a Malay, many non-Malays that converted feel robbed of their sense of religious and ethnic identity, and feel pressured to embrace the ethnic Malay culture.

Daut. (2023, p. 82)

Recognizing, maintaining, and revitalizing the cultural history of the Orang Asli are essential for restoring their heritage. By addressing the core causes of legacy loss, society may help to rebuild a resilient cultural identity for the Orang Asli, ensuring that their silent echoes are heard once again.

3.3.4 *Loss of Heritage*

Here are some verbatim remarks on the loss of history among Malaysia's Orang Asli, "*Our ancestral lands were more than just places to live; they were sacred spaces that held the essence of our culture and identity.*"

(Siti, female, Age 45)

With each passing generation, we're losing pieces of our traditional knowledge that sustained our communities for centuries.

(Rahman, Male, Age 38)

Our languages are like the threads that hold together our cultural tapestry. "Losing them is like losing a part of ourselves."

(Aminah, Female, Age 50)

The encroachment of modern development is like slow erosion, washing away the foundations of our heritage.

(Ismail, Male, Age 42)

We used to do ceremonies to honor our ancestors' spirits and celebrate our connection to the land. Those traditions are now fading away.

(Nor, Female, Age 54)

The loss of history among Malaysia's Orang Asli groups is a complex issue with consequences for cultural resilience and post-disaster rehabilitation (Huang, 2018; Nicholas, 2022). The loss of traditional knowledge and languages impairs their ability to face current issues while maintaining their cultural identity (Battiste, 2002, 2011; Whitford & Ruhanen, 2021). Efforts to save Indigenous cultural heritage must address the complexity of intellectual property rights and encourage community ownership (Lai, 2016; Xanthaki et al., 2017). In Malaysia, the staging of Indigenous heritage mirrors wider discussions about instrumentalization and representation. Indigenous entrepreneurs play an important role in fostering sociocultural sustainability through tourist enterprises, emphasizing the interdependence between

heritage preservation and economic growth; so, preserving Malaysia's Orang Asli history necessitates collaborative initiatives that recognize the sociocultural relevance of Indigenous knowledge and practices while navigating current heritage management problems (see Box 3.5, to question Hegel's depiction and get a more nuanced knowledge of the many cultural views).

Box 3.5 Our Stands with the Malaysian Policy, Malaysian Orang Asli, and Human Nature

To oppose Hegel's classification of Asian and African people as irrational, we might take a variety of approaches.

Counter Examples

Showcase instances where people or societies from Asian and African cultures have used logical thinking and reasoning.

Cultural Relativism

Emphasizes that diverse cultures have distinct methods of thinking and reasoning that may differ from Western logic norms.

Alternative Philosophical Perspectives

Investigate alternative philosophical ideas that reject Hegel's Eurocentric paradigm in favor of the agency and reason of colonized populations. Anthropological research to demonstrate the logical thinking and problem-solving ability seen in Asian and African civilizations.

Historical Context

Consider the biases and prejudices that existed during Hegel's time and how they may have impacted his categorizations, emphasizing the significance of revisiting these concepts in the current context.

Engage with Asian and African Philosophical Traditions

Learn about the rich philosophical traditions of Asian and African civilizations to display the depth of thinking and reasoning.

Using these methods, we may question Hegel's depiction and get a more nuanced knowledge of the many cultural views and contributions to human cognition and reasoning.

Ethnographic Observation

Despite the fear of language extinction, several Orang Asli tribes have begun initiatives to revitalize indigenous languages. Cultural Centre and community leaders provide language lessons, storytelling sessions, and workshops to preserve and transmit native languages to future generations. These efforts instill a sense of pride and connection to cultural heritage

in participants as they actively participate in language learning and preservation activities. While problems exist, such as limited finances and institutional support, grassroots initiatives by Orang Asli communities demonstrate resilience and resolve to preserve their language legacy for future generations. Indigenous knowledge loss is a complex issue with far-reaching ramifications for sustainable living, biodiversity protection, and cultural legacy (Grenoble & Whaley, 2021; McIvor, 2020). Indigenous knowledge systems, which are firmly anchored in centuries-old practices, provide vital insights into peaceful cohabitation with nature and biodiversity preservation (McKenzie, 2022). Furthermore, initiatives to revitalize indigenous languages and traditions are critical for resolving historical trauma and encouraging healing in indigenous communities (Warner, 1999). Revitalization programs not only help indigenous peoples regain their language and cultural identities, but they also contribute to global efforts for environmental sustainability and cultural diversity (Austin, 2022). As a result, protecting and revitalizing indigenous knowledge systems is not just an issue of cultural preservation but also an important step toward promoting environmental stewardship and cultural diversity globally (Ibrahim, 2021).

3.4 Loss of Indigenous Knowledge

During our (first author, second author, and third author) fieldwork¹ among Malaysia's Orang Asli population, the researchers came across numerous painful incidents that demonstrated the severe impact of conversion on the loss of Indigenous knowledge, notably in the sphere of traditional medicine.

An ancient healer recognized for his herbal and traditional healing skills was a notable example. Using generations-old expertise, community people sought his assistance on various ailments with dedication. After his conversion to Islam, society altered drastically. He was distrusted and excluded by several members of his tribe who considered his conversion to Islam as a betrayal of their Indigenous beliefs. Faced with mounting pressure and social isolation, the healer reluctantly abandoned his traditional therapies, fearing further separation. Thus, centuries-old information about medicinal plants and treatment methods may be lost forever. After he retired, younger generations lost the chance to learn from him, worsening traditional healing traditions. Another touching example is a midwife with advanced delivery skills and knowledge of labor customs. She joined Islam later in life, like many in her culture, seeking comfort and affiliation in a growing religion. However, her conversion caused her considerable psychological agony as she tried to reconcile her new faith with her Indigenous traditions.

The society mourned her loss of expertise and cultural worth as she gradually withdrew from midwifery to follow Islamic restrictions. Because she abandoned traditional birthing procedures, succeeding generations lost decades of knowledge and Indigenous childbirth ceremonies and traditions. The complex interplay between religious conversion, cultural identity, and Indigenous knowledge of Malaysia's Orang Asli tribe is shown in these anecdotes. They stress the need of measures that

¹Field observations from first author Jahid Siraz Chowdhury

maintain traditional practices while respecting religious freedom and autonomy. As scholars and activists, we must understand and solve Indigenous people's challenges while balancing tradition and modernity to preserve their unique cultural heritage for future generations. How can we protect Orang Asli medical competence from religious conversion? Interfaith dialogue and partnership between traditional healers and Islamic medical practitioners may improve mutual respect. This knowledge must be preserved via interviews and apprenticeships for future generations. Two individual cases that exemplify this phenomenon are described in the following paragraphs:

Healer 1, a respected figure in the community, recounted her experiences as a traditional healer. In her youth, she was known as "Tok Busuk," a title signifying her expertise in herbal remedies passed down through generations. Vividly, she described collecting plants from the nearby forest, each with specific curative properties. Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke of concocting healing mixtures and treating ailments like stomachaches and fevers. However, upon converting to Islam 10 years ago, she abandoned her healing practices. Her new faith, she explained, emphasized seeking medical attention from certified professionals. While she acknowledged the effectiveness of her traditional methods, a sense of religious conflict was evident. "Maybe it goes against Allah's will," she confided, her voice barely a whisper. This internal struggle highlights the pressure some Orang Asli healers face to relinquish their practices after conversion.

Healer 2, a charismatic figure with a mischievous glint in his eyes, presented a more defiant stance. A self-proclaimed "bomoh," a traditional spiritual healer, he expressed frustration with the dismissal of his knowledge by some Muslims in the community. "They call it *syirik* [forbidden practice in Islam]," he scoffed, "but these plants, they come from the same ground as the ones used for your religious rituals. How can they be bad?" Healer 2 continues to practice discreetly, treating those who still value his skills. However, his patient base has shrunk considerably, and the knowledge he possesses risks being lost with him.

These cases illustrate the complex interplay between religious conversion and the preservation of Indigenous knowledge. While some Orang Asli healers readily embrace new beliefs and medical practices, others grapple with the tension between tradition and faith. The fear of religious disapproval acts as a powerful deterrent, potentially leading to the gradual disappearance of a rich body of knowledge accumulated over generations. The medicinal tradition of the Orang Asli makes a distinctive and significant contribution to Malaysia's healthcare scene. Protecting this knowledge necessitates a multifaceted strategy that recognizes the issues created by religious conversion while also researching methods to maintain this important component of Orang Asli culture.

3.5 Reflection and Conclusion

Reflecting on the Orang Asli tales and experiences offered in this chapter revealed that their journey is characterized by a complex interplay of resilience, adaptation, and loss. The Orang Asli suffer a variety of obstacles that endanger their identity and well-being, including conversion and cultural heritage degradation, loss of traditional knowledge, and linguistic marginalization. Despite these challenges, there are signs of optimism and commitment, as seen by initiatives to restore linguistic heritage, conserve traditional practices, and revitalize Indigenous knowledge systems. The study of conversion tales exposes the enormous impact of outside influences on Orang Asli tribes, resulting in broken identities and social divides. Furthermore, the loss of language and tradition highlights the critical necessity for cultural preservation programs that prioritize Indigenous voices and agency. As we explore deeper into the nuances of Orang Asli experiences, it becomes critical to recognize their resilience and agency in navigating a fast-changing society while also pushing for their rights and respect. Finally, this chapter demonstrates the rich tapestry of Orang Asli tales, as well as the constant fight to affirm their cultural identity in the face of hardship.

Moving forward, it is critical to include their perspectives in policy, education, and cultural revival conversations to promote a more inclusive and equitable future for all Orang Asli communities.

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Chapter 4

Conversion Narratives of the Santals: Edges with Visualization



4.1 Introduction

The word “Indigenous” suggests both a cultural history and a call for universal rights and action. This chapter examines the Santals, an Adivasi group in Bangladesh and India. The study examines the complicated processes of their religious conversion, “indigenoussness,” and self-determination. Our investigation begins by examining the extensive use of “common good” rhetoric toward Indigenous people, particularly in development contexts. The “civilizing mission” disguised as development is rooted in the British Raj’s “enlightenment project” and conversion myths. This chapter gives personal tales of converted Santals thorough case studies and photovoice. It emphasizes how such transformations may be a “trap” and stimulus for human agency, dividing or uniting families and communities. The chapter explores the complex role of contemporary nongovernmental groups in the “civilizing mission” and the shifting landscape of Christian missionary work. Restoring their native Santal religion adds further complexity to the narrative. In conclusion, social science and social work practitioners should go beyond mere mimicry and connect with the Santals in a culturally sensitive and critically reflective approach. This will help the Santals rediscover their identity and goals.

4.2 Is Indigenous a Common Good? Some Oral Narratives of the One Edge

The notion of “Indigenous as a Common Good” underscores the deep correlation that exists between communal identities and Indigenous knowledge systems, which comprise an elaborate fabric of rituals, practices, and epistemologies that have been

transmitted across generations (Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2020). Oral narratives are intricately woven into the fabric of Santal communities, imparting knowledge regarding ancestral heritage, environmental consciousness, and cultural identity. This chapter explores the notion of “Indigenous as a Common Good” by analyzing these compelling narratives. This study investigates the ways in which Indigenous knowledge systems, which are deeply intertwined with the land and heritage, confront challenges posed by external entities while also negotiating the intricate complexities of cooperation and ethical participation. By employing the persuasive power of narratives, we explore the ways in which digital initiatives and Santal narratives can function as instruments to safeguard and disseminate this priceless knowledge, thereby promoting a mutual respect and adoration for “Indigenous as a Common Good.”

Santal oral traditions play a crucial role in safeguarding cultural values, opposing efforts to eradicate heritage, and asserting self-governance (Loomis, 2000). Nevertheless, the preservation of Indigenous knowledge and the observance of Indigenous authenticity are at risk due to external pressures; thus, unity is essential (Fontana & Grugel, 2016; Kuppe, 2009; Marques et al., 2019). The promotion of respectful engagement and the preservation of Indigenous autonomy are fundamentally influenced by the principle of “free prior informed consent” (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013; Wheeler, 2005). By capitalizing on narrative forms such as Santal oral and digital storytelling, an effective approach is identified to safeguard Indigenous knowledge and promote the well-being of the community (Valadez, 2010; Lang, 2022; Gallagher, 1995).

This section begins by posing a critical question: Can the concept of “Indigenous” be universally categorized as a “common good” deserving of universal protection and preservation? We embark on this exploration by examining the Santals’ resistance against the colonial “development” project and the underlying “enlightenment” narrative propagated by the British Raj. This historical context sets the stage for understanding the subsequent section, which delves into the phenomenon of conversion as a “civilizing mission” among the Santals, tracing its roots back to 53 BC through the lens of official documents and lived narratives.

4.2.1 The Resistance Against “Development” and Enlightenment Project of the British

The opposition of the Santal community to British colonial development initiatives, as exemplified by Sidhu and Kanu’s Santal Rebellion of 1854–55, serves as a prime example of the Santals’ resistance against repressive colonial policies that sought to assimilate and modernize them. Moreover, the Paru Raja rebellion, which is hypothesized to have transpired during the 1930s, exemplifies regional opposition to the dominion of the British East India Company (EIC). An additional indication of Santal involvement in impromptu resistance endeavors against colonial exploitation

and cultural assimilation is the Tebhaga movement of 1944–1946. An example of a policy that mirrored colonial assimilation efforts was the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, implemented by the British government in 1908. This measure served to escalate tensions and incite opposition from Indigenous communities.

Believing that their purported development initiatives were merely a pretext for our exploitation, we declined to endorse them. Even our predecessors resisted, as was the case during the British colonial period when they attempted to impose their will on us.

(John, Male, Age 45)

“They viewed development as the destruction of our forests, the displacement of our people, and the imposition of their religion and laws.” “Because we knew our way of life was at stake, we fought back.”

(Sara, Female, Age 32)

The British purported to introduce progress and enlightenment, but all we witnessed were devastation and the erosion of our culture. Our resistance was motivated by the conviction that our traditions merited preservation, even if it necessitated opposition to colonial powers.

(Ravi, Male, Age 50)

Prominent academics such as Jahan (2020) and Carrin (2022) extensively examine the intricacies of Santal identity and the politics of representation, illuminating the ways in which the community opposes cultural appropriation and state denial. The trajectories of Santal resistance against land theft and the violence inflicted upon them are examined by Das Gupta (2020) and Khan (2022). In the midst of ongoing colonization, Debnath (2023) offers insights into the Santal people’s endeavors to reclaim their Indigenous knowledge and voice. In his analysis of the radical Adivasi resistance in colonial India, Chaudhuri (2009) situates the Santals’ conflict within the context of more extensive historical accounts. The resistance described bears resemblance to present-day global movements, as emphasized by Brock (2020) in relation to demonstrations against fracking. Sultanovna (2020), Basu (2020), and Rudolph and Rudolph (2022) offer theoretical frameworks that facilitate comprehension of Santal resistance within historical and philosophical contexts through their analyses of Enlightenment movements and debates concerning civilization. The significant Santal rebellion of 1855–1856, which was recorded by Andersen (2022), Andersen et al. (2021), and Archer (1945 [1984]), represents the Santal people’s resistance against colonial subjugation and cultural assimilation. The resilience and determination of the Santal community to safeguard their cultural identity and autonomy are impressively demonstrated through their opposition to “development” and the imposition of external ideologies.

4.2.2 Conversion as Civilizing Mission Among the Indigenous Since 53 BC: Documents as Lived Narratives

“Our spiritual convictions and cultural customs were all aspects of our traditional way of life that have always been revered by our ancestors”. Nevertheless, the advent of colonial powers and missionaries imposed tremendous pressure on our population to embrace

Christianity. Although it was depicted as a means to achieve ‘civilization’ and advancement, many individuals perceived it as a challenge to their autonomy and sense of self.

(Rajesh, Male, Age 36)

“According to the missionaries, the documents and texts they carried contained the key to salvation.” These documents were employed as instruments of persuasion in an effort to dissuade us of the primitive and retrograde nature of our traditional beliefs. A significant number of Santals, who were confronted with economic hardship and social exclusion, were motivated to convert by the missionaries’ assurances of improved access to resources and opportunities.

(Sunita, Female, Age 42)

Ethnographic Observational Notes (First and Third Authors)

As a result of my fieldwork within the Santal community, I discerned a profound atmosphere of uncertainty and discord pertaining to the matter of conversion. Although certain individuals harbored animosity toward the missionary endeavors, regarding them as a potential encroachment upon their cultural heritage, others perceived conversion as a practical choice motivated by socioeconomic considerations. The intricate interplay between the Santal community’s desire for socioeconomic progress and the preservation of traditional beliefs underscores the complex dynamics that shape their response to external pressures to convert.

The Santal community, which has been documented in great detail by numerous scholars since the ne conversion process of nineteenth century, has spanned centuries (Das Gupta, 2021). The aforementioned conversion effort was a component of a more extensive plan that sought to alter the way Santals lived and to instill Western values and religious ideologies (Das Gupta, 2021). At the heart of this metamorphosis stood the integration of Christianity into the Santal belief systems, which constituted a pivotal juncture in their account of conversion (Debnath, 2023). Debnath’s scholarly contributions shed light on mission records, thereby offering valuable insights into the challenges faced by Santal people as they confronted the arrival of Christianity and its repercussions on their cultural customs. However, this process of conversion was anything but passive; it entailed intricate deliberations concerning faith and identity (Guetzkow, 1959). Santals participated in dialogues and intermittently opposed the endeavors to civilize them (Khan, 2022). By situating Santal conversion in the wider framework of Indigenous conversion experiences, as argued by scholars such as Bowen (2007) and Asad (2003), one can gain significant knowledge regarding the similarities and differences in colonial methods of attempting to colonize Indigenous communities. The complex dynamics among identity, culture, and religion in conversion endeavors are highlighted in the Santal case (Faiq, 2008; Francis & Francis, 2010).

4.3 Conversion Trap as “Development”: Location of the Santal-ness in the Religious Minority

Promises of improving living conditions and access to resources were utilized to coerce us into conversion. Instead of a sincere adoption of Christianity, it was a survival strategy that was forcibly implemented upon us.

(Rahul, Male, Age, 36)

Development was a deceptive pretext used to lure conversions. It was propagated that the adoption of Christianity would result in social and economic advancement opportunities. Nevertheless, this ultimately resulted in the marginalization of our community and the erosion of our traditional way of life.

(Priya, Female, Age 42)

The British colonial authorities employed conversion as a calculated tactic to subjugate and exert control over Indigenous communities, including our own. Their objective in fragmenting our religious identity was to undermine our cultural unity and increase our adherence to their colonial objectives.

(Amit, Male, Age 50)

An Observational Note

In the course of the interviews, the participants articulated feelings of disillusionment and animosity toward the conversion endeavors, emphasizing the coercive strategies implemented by colonial authorities and the detrimental consequences of religious conversion on the social structure and cultural legacy of their community.

The problem of Santal conversion is frequently disregarded in academic discourse in Bangladesh’s departments of Social Work and Anthropology, despite having considerable ramifications for the community’s institutionalization and socioeconomic position (Das Gupta, 2021; Jahan, 2020). This negligence has contributed to the Santal community sliding into the “trap of development,” intensifying their marginalization from mainstream society in terms of economic prospects and state privileges (Das Gupta, 2021). Academic studies demonstrate the Santal’s destitution and marginalization, emphasizing the importance of academic attention to their situation (Das Gupta, 2021; Jahan, 2020). Santals are frequently described as a “ethnic community” in official papers, sustaining a narrative of “we” against “them” dynamics and promoting their status as a minority group (Geraci & Khodorkovsky, 2019; Tank & Gundala, 2021). This elusive identity heightens tensions and fuels violence between the majority and minority populations.

4.3.1 Case 1: *The Lived Experience of Maya*

Case Study: Maya’s Lived Experience as a New Christian in Bangladesh

My name is Maya (name changed) and I’m from a tribal community in northern Bangladesh. My narrative is one of transformation, of discovering light in the middle of darkness, and of accepting a religion that has transformed the fundamental fabric of who I am.

Growing up, I was strongly steeped in my tribe’s traditions and rituals. Our way of life was inextricably linked to the rhythms of nature, and our beliefs were rooted in reverence for the land and its spirits. But, within the familiarity of tradition, I felt a stirring inside me, a yearning for something more, something that went beyond the confines of my earthly life.

During a moment of soul-searching, I first came across Christian doctrines. Drawn by the message of love and salvation, I was intrigued by Jesus Christ’s tales and transformational power. In that instant, I knew I’d found the solution to the long-standing questions in my heart.

My choice to accept Christianity was welcomed with a range of emotions from others around me. Some people accepted my newfound faith with open arms, acknowledging the authenticity of my beliefs. Others, however, regarded my conversion with skepticism and contempt, seeing it as a betrayal of our tribal customs.

Despite the difficulties and hostility I encountered, I maintained my faith, getting strength from the love and support of my fellow Christians. We developed a close-knit community, united by our common dedication to Christ and determination to living out his teachings in our everyday lives.

As I delved deeper into my newfound religion, I experienced a dramatic shift, both inside and out. Christianity's rituals and practices became important to my existence, directing my activities and defining my interactions with others. I discovered consolation in prayer, comfort in companionship, and fulfillment in helping others. However, this newfound sense of belonging also brought with it obstacles. My decision to follow Christ caused conflicts in my family and community, as others struggled to comprehend or accept my choice. Nonetheless, even in the face of criticism, I stayed steadfast in my faith, believing in God's purpose for my life.

Today, as we reflect on my experience as a new Christian in Bangladesh, I am grateful for the transformational power of Christianity. My conversion not only altered my life, but it also increased my awareness of the rich tapestry of diversity that makes our planet so beautiful. And, despite the obstacles that lie ahead, I walk confidently, knowing that I am guided by the light of God's love. Reflecting on this experience, Maya is grateful for faith's transformational influence. His conversion not only improved his life, but it also increased his respect for humanity's rich tapestry. While he understands that there may be problems ahead, he marches confidently, guided by God's love. Maya's case study provides insight into the personal and societal components of religious conversion, as well as the influence it has on an individual's life. His tale exemplifies the intricacies and challenges that might occur when embracing a new faith in a society steeped in its own traditions. It also demonstrates the tenacity and drive needed to overcome these obstacles while remaining loyal to one's convictions.

The next case study examines the way the Santal community upholds their Indigenous identity by employing traditional attire as symbolic representation, while concurrently embracing novel religious customs.

4.3.2 Case 2: Converted yet Wearing Santal Costumes

Even as we engage in conversations with members of other communities, we remain rooted in our Santal identity, proudly wearing our traditional attire as a symbol of our heritage.

(Rahul, Male, Age 45)

Our clothes are more than just that; they reflect who we are and where we came from. Even in current times, wearing Santal attire allows us to honor our ancestors while still preserving our cultural identity.

(Pias, Female, Age 32)

Observations

Despite the impact of industrialization and interaction with other cultures, the Santal people place a high value on keeping their cultural identity through traditional dress.

Wearing Santal attire during interactions with people from other cultures acts as a visual reminder of the Santal heritage as well as a way for them to establish their identity in a variety of social settings.

This practice illustrates the Santal community’s determination to preserve its cultural traditions while opposing assimilation into mainstream culture, even as they interact with the larger society.

Traditional clothes are important to the Santal people because they represent a great feeling of pride and connection to their cultural heritage, emphasizing the lasting quality of their identity in the face of a changing social landscape. Debnath’s work highlights the multiple issues that Indigenous Santal people in Bangladesh confront. Santals face a terrain of marginalization and cultural loss, from the concealed aim of civilizing missions to discriminatory education systems (Debnath, 2020). Living on the outskirts of societal systems, they face difficulties with land rights, education, and sociopolitical integration (Debnath, 2010; Dhamai, 2014). Their challenges are similar to wider arguments about sustainable development and Indigenous rights, stressing the dichotomy between growth and preservation (Du Pisani, 2006). Duyker’s study of Santal resistance movements sheds light on their durability in the face of sociopolitical change (Duyker, 1987). However, as Errico (2020) points out, obstacles remain, notably in implementing international accords such as ILO Convention No. 169 to safeguard Indigenous rights. While legal frameworks and historical research provide insights, the lived experiences of Santal communities highlight the importance of tackling their structural marginalization (Errico, 2020; Fuller, 2017). The examination of the Santals’ situation, as interpreted by these academic sources, enhances our comprehension of the intricate relationship between religious conversion and cultural preservation. This analysis underscores the complex process of renegotiating identity within Indigenous settings.

4.3.3 Case 3: Role of Faith-Based Development and Fractured Santal Identity

In Chap. 2, we discussed how Mahmood Mamdani (2020) considers faith-based type of development programs a “gift” (see Mamdani, 2020, p.329) from the mainstream people. Elsewhere, David Harvey (2012) has said that donation is a form of philanthropic colonialism. Let us explain.

The Santal are an Indigenous ethnic group in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. They have a rich cultural heritage and traditional religious practices. Many Santal people are converted to Christianity due to the efforts of missionaries. These missionaries provided education, healthcare, and other forms of assistance, which attracted the Santal community. While these efforts brought benefits, they also introduced significant cultural changes and power dynamics. Philanthropic colonialism, as discussed by Harvey (2012), refers to how charitable actions by powerful groups can

sometimes maintain or even deepen existing power imbalances. In the case of the Santal people, the conversion to Christianity through missionary work can be viewed through this lens.

4.3.3.1 Positive Aspects

1. **Education:** Missionaries established schools and taught the Santal people to read and write, which provided new opportunities.
2. **Healthcare:** Missionaries brought medical aid, reducing mortality and improving health.

4.3.3.2 Negative Aspects

1. **Cultural Displacement:** Traditional Santal religious practices and cultural norms were often seen as inferior and were replaced by Christian beliefs and practices. This led to a loss of cultural heritage.
2. **Dependence:** The Santal community became dependent on the missionaries for services, which could undermine their self-sufficiency.
3. **Power Imbalance:** The missionaries held significant power over the Santal people due to their control over education and healthcare, influencing not just religion but also social and political life.

4.3.3.3 Example of Philanthropic Colonialism

Imagine a missionary setting up a school in a Santal village. The school provides much-needed education but teaches from a Western, Christian perspective. While the Santal children benefit from learning to read and write, they also learn that their traditional beliefs are “wrong” or “inferior.” Over time, the Santal people might adopt the missionaries’ values and norms, leading to a shift away from their Indigenous culture. The missionaries, despite their good intentions, exert control over the community, shaping it according to their own values and beliefs. In this context, the philanthropic actions of the missionaries had both positive and negative impacts. While they provided essential services, they also imposed their own culture and values on the Santal people. This reflects the concept of philanthropic colonialism, where charity can sometimes reinforce existing power dynamics and cultural dominance.

As we previously mentioned, Christianity’s beginnings in India are inextricably linked to both ancient traditions and colonial history, reflecting its complex expansion. According to tradition, Thomas the Apostle introduced the faith to India around 52 AD, marking the beginning of its interactions with many civilizations. Furthermore, key events, such as the 1801 printing of the Bengali New Testament and William Carey’s baptism of Krishna Pal, demonstrate Christianity’s devotion to

conversion and religious book accessibility. These events, which shaped the landscape of independent Bangladesh, continue to resonate today, owing to the legacy of colonialism, cultural interaction, and Christian influence. They shed light on the continuous processes of culture, religion, and language, providing critical perspectives for our research community.

The involvement of faith-based development projects in the Santal community is a complex phenomenon impacted by a variety of variables and viewpoints. Karim (2012) investigates Santal religiosity and its consequences for conversion, offering insight on the intricacies of faith in the community. Debnath investigates the invisible purpose driving civilizing missions, expressing concerns about the real aims and consequences of such efforts. Similarly, Doorey (2018) investigates the role of faith in the development activities of Christian NGOs in Bangladesh, providing insights into their techniques and efficacy. Furthermore, Devine and White (2013) analyze the relationship between religion, politics, and moral order in Bangladesh, emphasizing the contextual elements that influence faith-based interventions. These studies contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how faith-based development programs interact with Santal identity, addressing both possible advantages and limitations within the community’s sociocultural framework.

4.3.4 Case 4: Faith Matters to Deeper Family Bondage

Case Study: At the core of the Santal community is a story of intertwined fates and strong familial relationships, with faith serving as the foundation of their existence. Meet Rani and Raju, siblings from a modest Santal family living in the lush surroundings of rural Bangladesh.

Rani, the elder of the two, has a calm power that defies her young age. She was raised with Santal spirituality, learning the holy rites and practices that had been passed down through centuries. For Rani, faith is more than just a belief system; it is a way of life that guides her every action and choice. Raju, on the other hand, is a passionate individual with an unquenchable appetite for knowledge and experience. Unlike his sister, he frequently questions the customs and conventions supported by his society. Despite his rebellious temperament, he has a deep appreciation for the old rites that have defined their collective identity. Their relationship as siblings is unshakable, formed over years of shared laughter, sorrow, and experiences. They handle the ups and downs of life in a community that is both strongly anchored in tradition and struggling to adapt to changing times.

As they get older, Rani and Raju find themselves caught between tradition and modernity. While Rani is pleased to follow in their ancestors’ footsteps, embracing the traditions and rites that have defined their family for generations, Raju longs for something more—a life outside of their town, where he can travel the world and forge his own path.

Despite their disagreements, faith remains the uniting factor that holds the siblings together. The rituals they do together, the songs they sing, and the tales they tell provide them with consolation and strength. For Rani and Raju, faith is more than simply a set of beliefs; it is the very core of who they are—a monument to the lasting power of family, tradition, and love in the face of a constantly changing world.

Finally, as they stand side by side, confronting the uncertainty of the future, Rani and Raju find solace in knowing that no matter where life takes them, their relationship as siblings and shared faith would always lead them home.

Cases 2 and 4 highlight the importance of faith in fostering stronger family bonds. Faith is inextricably linked to familial relationships in the Santal community, and it has a tremendous impact on the lives of its residents. Here, we tell the experiences of Rajesh and Rina, two people who demonstrate the powerful influence of faith on their family relationships.

Rajesh, a middle-aged Santal man, descends from a long line of ancestors who adhere to the Santal traditional belief system. For decades, their faith has served as the foundation of their identity, fostering a sense of community among family members. Rajesh grew up learning about the Santal community's unique rituals, customs, and spiritual practices. He saw his parents and grandparents perform holy rites to honor their ancestors' spirits and seek blessings for the family's well-being. When Rajesh married Rina, a young Santal lady, their faith became the cornerstone of their relationship. Rina, like Rajesh, was nurtured in a family steeped in Santal culture. Their similar belief system not only drew them together but also deepened their relationship when they began their married life. They continued to follow the rites and practices passed down through generations, honoring their community's ideals. Rajesh and Rina's beliefs went beyond their personal life, influencing how they raised their children. They understood the significance of teaching Santal customs and spirituality to their children, ensuring the preservation of their cultural legacy. Their entire family life was filled with dedication and reverence. They taught their children the value of community, respect for the environment, and the interdependence of all things.

As Rajesh and Rina's children grew older, their faith and cultural traditions provided strength and stability in a rapidly changing world. Their family enthusiastically participated in Santal festivals, rites, and community meetings, which instilled a sense of belonging and a strong connection to their heritage. The shared experiences and communal worship fostered in their children a feeling of identity and pride in their Santal ancestry.

In moments of joy and grief, Rajesh and Rina's family found comfort and guidance in faith. When faced with hardship, they looked to their community and spiritual leaders for help and guidance. The Santal religious system provided them with a framework for unraveling life's mysteries, finding meaning in adversity, and enjoying the bounties bestowed upon them. Rajesh and Rina left a legacy of strong family bonds as a result of their uncompromising devotion to their faith and the ideals it represents. Their shared love of Santal customs has not only enriched their relationship but has also instilled a sense of belonging and solidarity in their children and other family members. Faith, in the context of the Santal community, is a significant force that influences people's lives and reinforces the bonds that keep families together.

Finally, Rajesh and Rina's stories demonstrate how faith plays an important role in family bonding within the Santal community. Their mutual devotion to Santal customs and spirituality has not only enhanced their relationship but has also

created a strong sense of belonging and togetherness among their family members. Through their faith, they have laid a solid foundation for their family’s identity and cultural heritage, passing on their values and customs to future generations.

4.3.5 Case 5: Conversion Loosens Santal Cohesion

In the Santal community, faith is the foundation of family cohesiveness, tying generations together through shared traditions and values. Consider the case of Manoj and his family, who live in a secluded Santal hamlet set among the hills. Manoj’s parents and grandfather instilled in him Santal faith from an early age. He learned the religious chants and ceremonies that marked significant events in the family’s existence, including birth, marriage, and death.

As Manoj grew older, he took on the responsibility of sustaining these traditions and passing them along to future generations. Faith, for him, was more than just a personal affair; it strengthened the ties that bound his family to their ancestors and to one another.

Let us share an interview session

Researcher: Can you tell me about any interactions you’ve had with missionaries in your community?

Informant: Oh, I recall a period when a missionary agent visited here. He was going about attempting to convert people, teaching them about Christianity and everything. However, the majority of people here did not agree with it. They viewed him as an outsider, attempting to disrupt our way of life.

Researcher: How did the community respond to his presence?

Informant: I suppose several people were curious at first. But when they figured out what he was up to, they weren’t having it. They saw right through his objectives and refused to deal with him or his ideas.

Researcher: Did his presence generate any tension or strife in the neighborhood?

Informant: Definitely. There were tense debates and conflicts, particularly among the elderly. They were concerned about his effect on the next generation and wanted to preserve our traditions and values.

Researcher: How do you believe the missionary agent’s activities influenced the community?

Informant: It sure got things going for a bit. But ultimately, I believe it drew us closer together as a community. We saw the need of conserving our cultural legacy and standing up to outside forces that threaten it.

Researcher: Thank you for sharing your ideas. It is obvious that the presence of missionary agents has a substantial influence on community dynamics and beliefs. It would be helpful for these NGOs to focus on knowing and cooperating with the community rather than focusing on conversion. They may guarantee that their efforts are aligned with the needs and objectives of the community by actively interacting with leaders and involving them in decision-making processes. Respect for local customs and traditions should be at the core of their strategy, encouraging trust and collaboration.

Researcher: Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with faith-based NGOs in your town. Your viewpoint offers useful insights for encouraging teamwork and cultural awareness in their work.

Informant: You're welcome. I think that when faith-based NGOs and communities collaborate respectfully and inclusively, we can accomplish significant and long-term development for everyone.

Ethnographic Notes

During the fieldwork, the researcher came across cases where young people and informants raised worries regarding the role of missionary agents in the neighborhood. Some people seemed unwilling to openly discuss customary law, indicating that societal pressure was impacting its practice. For example, a young person was hesitant to participate in discussion, while a crucial informant initially avoided discussing the subject directly, only supplying information later by phone call. This implies hesitancy or worry over the issue of missionary agents.

Field Interview Verbatim

Researcher: Could you please inform me about the engagement of organizations working with marginalized groups in the research area?

Informant: CARITAS has been operating here for a long time, meeting the needs of marginalized people in a variety of ways. Ethnographic Notes Field observations show that several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and groups, including Caritas Bangladesh, BRAC, Grameen Bank, missionaries, South, World Vision, and UDPS, are active in the research region. These organizations play significant roles in meeting the needs of marginalized groups.

Field Interview Verbatim

Researcher: How are the Santal people's rights protected in their community?

Informant: The Santal people's rights are constantly regulated by their social norms and beliefs, known as customary law. Minority rights are based on social norms and trust.

Ethnographic Notes

The Santal people's rights in the community are dictated by social standards and faith, both of which are based on customary law. Social norms and trust are seen as key parts of minority rights, particularly those of the Santal group.

However, the advent of Christianity into the Santal society has gradually eroded these strong relationships. Consider Sunita and her family, who converted to Christianity in the hopes of improving their chances and social status. As they embraced their new faith, they became more in conflict with their Santal neighbors, who saw their conversion as a betrayal of their common history. The schism created by conversion increased as Sunita's family separated themselves from Santal customs and rituals, preferring behaviors that coincided with their newfound religion. This breakdown in connection has left Sunita's family and their Santal neighbors feeling isolated and estranged, emphasizing the deep influence of religious conversion on community relations.

4.4 Philanthropic Colonialism

On that day, Babu (name changed) was present along with eminent social worker Sani and the Pikat (name changed) and Babu of Pargana Mahal of that area and Peer. A scenario can be seen in Christmas celebrations. Hundreds of children, men, and women of the Santal community of the upazila participated. A revolutionary change was observed in their way of life, starting from their dress and speech patterns. “Now we can live better. Our way of life has changed radically. Now we have education, work and daily life, and Christian ideas are emerging in the place of Santalio ideas.” Expressing the same opinion is Mau, a Secondary School Certificate (SSC) candidate of the same school who performed dance on Pak Barda Day. Silat’s wife Sheela, who got a house in Betara Guchchagram, a resettlement center for Santals in the Upazila, said, “We left the original Santal religion a long time ago. We are getting used to their culture with Christian ideology day by day.” Jatiya Parliament Member Upazila Awami League President Principal Abul Kalam Azad was present as the chief guest at the Pak Barad celebration of the converted Christian Santals of the Upazila on Saturday morning.

We see evidence of philanthropic colonialism right next to our field location with the Christian Mission Hospital (CMHR). Established in 1926 by UK Presbyterian missionaries, the CMHR exemplifies a tactic used during colonial times. While it provides vital healthcare, especially to the Santal community, it also served as a tool to spread Christianity. This tactic wasn’t new. Professor Saidur Rahman details a history of missionary activity spreading across Bangladesh (Dinajpur (1795), Jessore (1805), Dhaka (1816), Barisal (1828), Khulna (1860), Chittagong (1881), and Rangpur (1891)) throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Islam, 2001, p. 186). These missions offered social services like healthcare but with the underlying goal of religious conversion (Harvey, 2009).

4.4.1 *Who Lives Inside? Mission and Development*

Krish (name changed) was forced to convert to Christianity due to the village’s varied temptations. He was tempted and converted to Christianity a few days ago. After quitting his faith and turning to Christianity, he saw his error and returned to his old religion. Krish acknowledged his error in front of Majhi Baba and Pargana Baba from the tribal Santal community and returned to the Santal or Sari faith. Panat Pargana Baba of Zakat Majhi Pargana Mahal readopted Sari Dharma in front of Honorable chief guest in accordance with their society’s regulations. Krish accepted religion in his Santal culture after worshipping according to societal conventions, and then he then accepted the Sari faith. “Our faith is inextricably linked with our entire existence. It’s not only about religion; it’s about our collective identity.”

“The decision to convert to Christianity was not made lightly.” We were lured to the promises of assistance and camaraderie, but our roots eventually drew us back to the old Sarna faith.

(Raj, Male, Age 72)

We thought embracing Christianity would bring us closer to modernity and development, but we found ourselves disconnected from our heritage and traditions

(Piya, Female, Age 49)

No amount of material support can replace the sense of belonging we find in our old religion.

(Sunil, Male, Age 52)

The materials supplied provide a thorough examination of the Santal people in Bangladesh, addressing all elements of their social, cultural, and historical backgrounds

(Sita, Female, Age 49)

Works such as Ali’s *Santals of Bangladesh* (1998), Qureshi’s *Tribal Cultures in Bangladesh* (1984), and Culshaw’s *Tribal Heritage* (1949) explore tribal identity and incorporation within Bangladeshi culture. Karim and Mahbub’s article presented at the Indian Anthropological Society’s conference in Santiniketan, as well as Siddiquee’s work on ethnic and cultural studies, shed light on the Santals’ vocational diversity and sociocultural adaptation. Furthermore, scholarly papers such as Shelly’s *The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh* (1992) provide insights into the geographic and developmental elements of tribal territories. These studies add to our understanding of the Santal community’s dynamics, including cultural traditions, socioeconomic situations, and challenges in modern Bangladesh.

4.4.2 *Role of the Nongovernment Sector in Bangladesh: Invisible Civilizing Mission yet Development Means Christianization*

This short piece describes a situation in which development measures aimed toward Santal Indigenous communities in Bangladesh are accompanied with clandestine attempts to convert them to Christianity. While purportedly attempting to better their socioeconomic situations, certain organizations may use development programs to further their religious goals. This strategy raises concerns about the deterioration of the Santal people’s cultural and religious identity. To secure the preservation of the rights, autonomy, and cultural legacy of Santal Indigenous people, such development organizations’ objectives and activities must be closely examined. NGOs in Bangladesh claim to be involved in development activities, but they are secretly promoting Christianization among Indigenous tribes. Despite the presence of various NGOs, Indigenous communities, notably Santals, continue to live traditional lifestyles, which are threatened by deforestation, poaching, and conversion pressures. Tribal people, primarily Santals, live in several areas of northern Bangladesh, relying on traditional farming techniques and land supplied by

landowners. Due to dwindling fishing opportunities, women grow vegetables, while men hunt for meat. However, NGOs and missionary organizations' efforts to modernize and convert tribes conflict with their traditional legacy.

These activities have reduced animal populations and altered the natural balance while disrespecting the tribes' traditional way of life. Experts and activists have called for government involvement to conserve tribal culture and natural resources. However, NGOs' clandestine goals involving Christian conversion pose considerable difficulties to long-term economic and cultural preservation initiatives in Bangladesh's northern areas. The list of 50 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (see Box 4.1) discreetly engaged in Christian missions highlights the complicated interplay between faith-based activities and development efforts in Bangladesh. However, the role of social work experts remains an important subject, which will be addressed in the next section.

Box 4.1 List of NGOs Working For Christianity

These missionary NGOs include (1) World Missionary Evangelism, (2) The Salvation Army, (3) Bangladesh Foreign Mission Board, (4) Main-night Central Committee, (5) Seven-day Adventist Church of Bangladesh, (6) Adventist Development and Relief Agency International, (7) New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society, (8) Bangladesh Luther Mission (Venice), (9) International Christian Fellowship, (10) Baptist Mid Mission Bangladesh, (11) New Life Center, (12) Baptist Missionary Society, (13) Social and Institution Board, (14) Church of God Mission, (15) Christian Service Society, (16) Community Health Care Project, (17) Finnish Free Foreign Mission, (18) Association of Baptist, (19) Christian Reform World-relief Committee, (20) World Vision of Bangladesh, (21) Bangladesh Luther Mission (Finnish), (22) Young Women's Christian Association of Bangladesh, (23) Bangladesh Bible Society, (24) College of Christian Theology, (25) Christian National Evangelism, (26) The Australian Baptist Missionary Society, (27) World Alliance of YMCA Bangladesh, (28) National Council of YMCA Bangladesh, (29) New Apostolic Church of Bangladesh, (30) Calvary Apostolic Church, (31) Assembles of God Mission, (32) Santal Mission Norwegian, (33) Presbyterian Plebes in Bangladesh, (34) Bangladesh Luther Mission (Norwegian), (35) Jatio Church Parishad, (36) The Church of Bangladesh Social development Program, (37) Friends of Bangladesh, (38) Rainbow House International, (39) Christian Life Bangladesh, (40) Connie, (41) Life Bangladesh, (42) Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB), (43) CARITAS Bangladesh, (44) Swedish Free Mission, (45) Hid Bangladesh, (46) BCRS Foundation Homes, (47) Action aid, (48) World-vision Prayer League, (49) Ideas International, (50) Rangpur-Dinajpur Rural Service, (5.1) Dip-Shikha, and (52) World Vision.

(Islam, 2001, p. 200)

There are 50 listed NGOs in Bangladesh (Islam, 2001); in our field, we counted 16 NGOs that are active, and Karim (2012) found 12 are active in greater Rajshahi and working in the “development” field. However, there are no data yet available and our mimic and captive scholars barely think of this concern.

4.4.3 *The Role of Social Science and Social Work Professionals: Mimic Scholars*

Following Hussein Alatas (2004), he identified uncritical scholars as “captive scholars.” Homi Bhabha (2012) referred to them as “mimic scholars,” and Ngugi wa Thiong’o termed them as “comprador intellectuals.” Somewhere in Bangladesh, a disturbing tendency in Bangladeshi social research and social work has been identified as “intellectual and professional confinement.” These professors, often known as mimic scholars, have become agents of postcolonial influence, sustaining a system that mirrors the exact systems they claim to oppose. Despite the large number of theses, research articles, and seminars produced since the country’s independence in 1971, only Debnath (2010, 2020), Chowdhury et al. (2024a, b), and Islam (2001) have provided critical voices.

From an anticolonial standpoint, it is crucial to recognize the lack of true decolonial discourse in Bangladesh’s social sciences and social work. The prevalence of a “color-blind constitution,” as proposed by Kingbust for India, has also hindered the identification of the underlying power dynamics and systemic inequities that exist in Bangladesh.

Mimic scholars are silent on the fact of significant sociocultural shifts (shown in Box 4.2) that they have, unwittingly or not, contributed to this stalemate by recreating the identical knowledge structures and procedures that emerged during colonial periods. This colonial hangover emerges in a variety of ways. As a result, our “solutions” frequently miss the mark, failing to address the root causes of societal issues and instilling a sense of disenfranchisement in the individuals we seek to empower. To restore authenticity and challenge the established status quo, social science and social work professionals in Bangladesh must take an anticolonial stance. This means critically assessing current knowledge systems, challenging their epistemological basis, and emphasizing the perspectives and experiences of marginalized people, notably the Santal Indigenous community. It is sad to note that the works of Ali (1998[2008]), Ali (2002[1980]), Archer (1945[1984]), Bodding (1887), and Bodding (1925) have mainly ignored the Santal people’s opinions and demands, continuing their marginalization.

Box 4.2 Santal Community's Conversion to Christianity in Bangladesh Reflects Significant Sociocultural Shifts

The Santal community's conversion to Christianity in Bangladesh reflects significant sociocultural shifts. While deeply rooted in traditional faith, external influences like missionary activities have reshaped their identity (Roy, 1911; Roy & Rizvi, 1990). Roy et al. (2020) explores how this conversion impacts education and religious practices, altering their traditional knowledge systems. Ethnic tensions and rights struggles (Roy et al., 2022; Saqi, 2019) contextualize this decision within broader sociopolitical dynamics. Roy et al. (2023) discuss the Santal's role in sustainable development, suggesting implications for environmental stewardship. Efforts to address ethnic inequality (Shafie & Kilby, 2003) and photovoice studies (Sanon et al., 2014) offer insights into their experiences with inclusion. The Santal's adoption of Christianity reflects complex interactions between heritage, socioeconomic factors, and aspirations for empowerment and resilience.

Adopting an anticolonial position necessitates a paradigm shift toward decolonizing research methodology, participating in collaborative and participatory approaches, and elevating the voices of people who have traditionally been silenced. By doing so, social science and social work experts may break free from the confines of imitation and contribute to the actual empowerment and freedom of the Bangladeshi people. It is time to choose authenticity above duplication, since only then can genuine social justice and decolonization be possible.

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter delved into the conversion narratives of the Santal Indigenous population, revealing the complex processes of conversion, acculturation, and identity. The Santals' opposition to the British colonial enterprise and the succeeding civilizing mission through Christianity were investigated, providing insight into the historical context of conversion. The chapter also examined instances where people converted while retaining their Santal identity, showcasing the complexity and tensions that can arise in faith-based development programs. Furthermore, the role of the nongovernmental sector and current Christian missions in Bangladesh was discussed, with a focus on their implicit civilizing agenda and its impact on the Santal people. A critical examination of imitative scholarships in social science and social work was conducted, emphasizing the importance of an anticolonial perspective and genuine engagement with the marginalized Santal community. The chapter concludes by advocating for a paradigm shift toward decolonization, highlighting the Santals' voices and experiences while questioning the replication of colonial knowledge systems. And while Chap. 5 may forestall some pernicious issues of enhancing social work practice through intersectionality,

cultural competence, and ethical considerations, Chap. 6 will conclude the narratives with an inclusive model for social harmony.

Colonialism means that the entire country is or has just been freed from physical colonial rule. We know the problem lies in the system. Just the problem with individual rights. We need to think of a race where everyone starts on the same line. It is like focusing on individual rights; justified self-interest that seems fair, but what if someone does not have good shoes or is not trained? They can lose even if they try their best, like the Orang Asli or the Santal.

The book *State Is Not a Birthday Pie* (Chowdhury, in press) discusses structural inequities caused by colonial injustice and their social effects. Indeed, “anthropologists with problems of ethnicity” (Cohen, 1978, p.380) described meticulously avoiding ethnicity denial. *State Is Not a Birthday Pie* addresses social injustices in Malaysia and Bangladesh, especially the Orang Asli and Santal populations. The title’s words “birthday pie” or “cake” relate to social work structural inequities.¹ Our argument spotlights the challenges faced by both Indigenous and converted members of these communities, such as Orang Asli who have converted to Islam and Santal who have embraced Christianity. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, these groups suffer disproportionately from a dearth of state resources and opportunities. This inequity is exacerbated by a utilitarian state philosophy that prioritizes the greatest good for the greatest number, often at the expense of marginalized communities. The persistent inequity highlighted in the book necessitates a philosophical shift beyond the utilitarian framework.

A more equitable society might be achieved through a deontological perspective, which again reflects Kantian notion of cosmopolitanism that is now globalization; hence, we reject it as it emphasizes duty and obligation to individuals, not the commons, and is irrespective of collective benefit. This ethical system would necessitate a reevaluation of societal contracts to ensure inherent human rights and dignity are protected for all, especially the marginalized. Furthermore, a virtue ethics approach could foster a society where individuals cultivate virtues like compassion, justice, and empathy. These virtues would inform, again, individualism, policy decisions, and interpersonal interactions, leading to a more less-inclusive and less equitable society. A synthesis of these ethical frameworks could provide a reimagination and a more solid foundation for addressing systemic inequalities. This is Indigenous Gnoseology-based policy and reciprocal ethics, which would involve recognizing the inherent worth of every individual, fulfilling their duties to protect their rights and cultivating a society where compassion and justice are core values. Such a society would move beyond the limitations of utilitarianism and strive for a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities.

To comprehensively interrogate the chasm between theoretical constructs and lived experiences of marginalization, a profound engagement with Indigenous Gnoseology, or the intricate tapestry of Indigenous worldviews, epistemologies, and ontologies, becomes imperative. While Western philosophical paradigms, such as Kantian deontology and Aristotelian virtue ethics, offer valuable frameworks,

¹ For details, see Chowdhury, JS (2025, in press). *State Is Not a Birthday Pie*. TRC Press.

they often fall short of encapsulating the holistic and relational nature of Indigenous knowledge systems.

As an alternative narrative, Chowdhury et al. (2022a, b) introduce the concept of “Ihsanic” philosophy, a framework rooted in Islamic ethics that emphasizes reciprocity, compassion, and human dignity. While it offers a potential counterpoint to Western thought by highlighting the importance of relationality and ethics, it also intersects with the critique of hierarchical structures inherent in patriarchal and religious systems. This raises pertinent questions about the potential for “Ihsanic” philosophy to fully emancipate marginalized groups without a concomitant interrogation of underlying power dynamics. Moreover, the applicability of “Ihsanic” philosophy, primarily developed within a specific cultural context, to diverse global scenarios remains an open question. A nuanced examination of its compatibility with Indigenous Gnoseology and its potential to address the unique challenges faced by communities like the Orang Asli and Santal is essential.

Indigenous Gnoseology, as a counter-narrative, proffers a holistic ontology that emphasizes interconnectedness, sustainability, and community well-being. Yet, as Siraz, Abd Wahab, and Saad (Siraz et al., 2020b) caution, a monolithic understanding of Indigenous worldviews is perilous. The diversity of Indigenous cultures necessitates a nuanced approach that eschews essentialist generalizations. The imperative to “reconnect with the land” (Chowdhury et al., 2024a), while resonant with many Indigenous cosmologies, must be contextualized within the complexities of contemporary ecological crises.

The praxis of volunteering, often idealized as a selfless act, demands a more critical lens. While Siraz et al. (2020b) illuminate the potential of volunteerism as a conduit for social change, it is essential to avoid the pitfalls of neocolonial paternalism. Indigenous communities possess intrinsic capacities for self-determination and resilience, and external interventions must be predicated on principles of reciprocity and respect. To effectuate meaningful transformation, a synergistic interplay between Indigenous Gnoseology and Western analytical frameworks is required. This necessitates a decolonization of knowledge production, empowering Indigenous voices to shape research agendas and policy outcomes. Ultimately, the pursuit of justice and equity demands a profound epistemological shift, one that acknowledges the plurality of worldviews and centers the experiences of marginalized communities. This philosophical positionality is revisited in Chap. 7—the conclusion.

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Chapter 5

The Conversion in Indigenous Communities: Enhancing Social Work Practice Through Intersectionality, Cultural Competence, and Ethical Considerations



5.1 Introduction

Religious conversion in Indigenous societies creates a complicated environment for social work practice. This chapter investigates the complex relationship between conversion experiences, social work intervention, and the distinct settings of the Orang Asli and Santal communities. Navigating this panorama necessitates a comprehensive grasp of how multiple influences impact individual spiritual journeys.

The concept of intersectionality (Friedman, 2015; Purkayastha, 2012) provides a critical lens through which social workers can examine the role of various identities and social locations, such as race, colonialism, and gender, in shaping conversion experiences within these communities. Recognizing the interdependence of these elements helps social workers obtain a better understanding of the multiple issues that people may confront during and after conversion (Patras, 2021). This encourages a more informed and compassionate approach to offering assistance. Furthermore, cultural competency emerges as a critical component of effective social work practice in this setting (Bharadwaj et al., 2021). It means recognizing and respecting the varied cultural contexts and attitudes about conversion that are strongly established in the Orang Asli and Santal populations. This involves social workers' ongoing learning and self-reflection, allowing them to tailor their approach to each community's unique cultural values and customs. Ethical issues are fundamental to the process of assisting those experiencing conversion (Angeletti, 2021). Social workers must adhere to the values of informed consent, respect for autonomy, and nonmaleficence, ensuring that individuals maintain control over their religious journeys and are not coerced or pressured into making decisions. This chapter investigates how social work practice might be improved to better serve people undergoing conversion within Indigenous communities.

5.2 Intersectionality in Religious Conversion: The Santal and the Orang Asli

Intersectionality in religious conversion among the Orang Asli community refers to the complex interaction of different crossing elements that influence individual experiences and group dynamics. Our examination of this phenomena reveals a complex terrain shaped by sociocultural, economic, and environmental factors. Our investigation revealed the critical role of language instruction in the context of religious conversion among the Orang Asli (Letchamanan et al., 2021). Language limitations and educational gaps exacerbate the difficulties experienced by people undertaking religious change in this society. Furthermore, psychiatric illness emerged as a prominent element influencing the religious experiences of the Orang Asli, emphasizing the link between mental health and religious identity (Iberahim, 2020). The challenges of religious conversion among the Orang Asli are compounded by concerns about Indigenous rights and development obstacles. Research has highlighted the importance of resettlement and customary rights on the sociopolitical context in which religious changes take place (Nor-Hisham & Ho, 2018). Additionally, community-based ecotourism programs play an important role in safeguarding the Orang Asli cultural legacy by providing insights into the interaction of economic activities, environmental protection, and religious identity (Razak et al., 2023). As a result, our investigation of intersectionality in religious conversion among the Orang Asli highlights the need to gain a comprehensive understanding of the various elements that shape individual experiences and community dynamics. By recognizing the interdependence of language education, mental health, Indigenous rights, and socioeconomic concerns, we obtain a better grasp of the challenges of religious transformation in the Orang Asli community.

In contrast, intersectionality in religious conversion among the Santal community reveals a complex story formed by intersecting sociocultural, political, and historical forces. Our investigation of this phenomena sheds light on the intricate mechanisms that shape individual religious experiences and group identity. The Santal Rebellion of 1855–1856 acts as a historical backdrop, demonstrating the Santals' opposition to colonial oppression and desire for autonomy (Andersen, 2022). This uprising highlights the convergence of religious identity, sociopolitical issues, and Indigenous rights in the Santal community. Furthermore, research on Santal folklore and Indigenous knowledge provide insights into the cultural history and symbolic value contained in Santal religious activities (Bompas, 2023; Carrin, 2022).

The formation of Santal identity within the nation-state of Bangladesh exemplifies the complicated interaction between Indigenous rights, nation-building initiatives, and cultural preservation. Bhattacharyya's (2019) study delves into the issues of Indigenous identity in the context of nation-building agendas, focusing on the interplay of political ideology and ethnic identification among the Santals. Education emerges as a significant area for intersectionality and religious conversion among the Santals. Studies on Santal education policy and cultural alienation highlight the

community's struggle in navigating modern school systems while retaining its cultural legacy (Brandt, 2011; Debnath, 2020). Furthermore, linguistic research on the Santali script provided insights into the relationship between language revitalization initiatives and religious identification among the Santals (Choksi, 2018). As such, our investigation on intersectionality in religious conversion within the Santal community emphasizes the importance of comprehending the multifaceted nature of identity, sociopolitical settings, and cultural dynamics. By recognizing the interconnection of these elements, we obtain a better understanding of the complexity of religious transformation within the Santal community.

Examining the intersection of religion with other social markers unveils the intricate tapestry of Santal experiences. This nuanced understanding is vital for promoting religious freedom, cultural sensitivity, and social justice within the Santal community. By acknowledging the complex interplay of diverse factors, we can foster a more inclusive and equitable environment for individuals to navigate their religious journeys.

5.3 Supporting Converted Individuals with Cultural Competence

Supporting converted persons with cultural competency requires a thorough grasp of their religious transition experiences within the cultural settings of their Indigenous cultures. This part delves into the critical significance of cultural competency in providing successful assistance to converted persons, drawing on anthropological observations and field research in both the Orang Asli and Santal communities.

Cultural competency in social work practice entails acknowledging and respecting individuals' varied cultural origins, beliefs, and behaviors. Social workers must engage in constant self-reflection and learning to understand how culture shapes the experiences and needs of converted persons (Wilson, 2010). By incorporating cultural competency principles into their practice, social workers can foster inclusive and empowering environments that respect converted persons' religious and cultural identities (Rahman & Wong, 2020).

Ethnographic observations of the Orang Asli highlight the need for cultural competency in addressing the unique issues that converted persons experience within their society. Studies have shown that culturally competent interventions improve the well-being and integration of converted individuals by instilling a sense of belonging and cultural continuity (Ceo-DiFrancesco et al., 2020). Social workers play a critical role in providing culturally sensitive support services that recognize and affirm converted persons' religious and cultural identities (O'Hara et al., 2021).

Similarly, in the Santal community, cultural competency is essential for comprehending the cultural norms, values, and traditions that affect converted persons' experiences (Cartwright et al., 2017). Ethnographic research emphasizes the significance of incorporating cultural competency into social work practice to combat the

stigma, prejudice, and social isolation that converted persons frequently face (Trimble, 2003). By adding cultural competency into intervention procedures, social workers can help converts manage the complexities of their religious journey while preserving their cultural background (Knipper, 2013).

Furthermore, cultural competency allows social workers to engage successfully with other care providers and community members to create culturally responsive support networks for converted persons (Cross, 1989). Social workers can develop comprehensive support networks for converted persons by collaborating with religious leaders, community elders, and Indigenous healers (Whaley & Davis, 2007).

To support converted persons with cultural competency, social workers must participate in continuous learning, self-reflection, and cooperation to recognize and address the particular issues and needs of individuals undergoing religious transition within Indigenous communities.

Supporting individuals navigating religious conversion within Indigenous communities like the Orang Asli and Santal requires a culturally competent approach from social workers. This means acknowledging and respecting the diverse cultural contexts and beliefs surrounding conversion while ensuring the well-being and agency of individuals throughout their journeys. Here, we explore how social workers can leverage cultural competence to support converted individuals within these communities.

5.4 Developing Cultural Humility

Social workers must cultivate cultural humility (Trimble, 2003), an ongoing process of self-reflection and learning (Ceo-DiFrancesco et al., 2020). This involves recognizing personal biases and limitations in understanding diverse cultures, continuously seeking knowledge about the specific cultural contexts of the Orang Asli and Santal communities and engaging in ongoing self-assessment to ensure respectful and culturally sensitive practice.

5.5 Building Trust and Rapport

Building trust and rapport with individuals and communities is crucial (Wilson, 2010). This can be achieved through active listening, respectful communication, and demonstrating genuine interest in their experiences and perspectives. Social workers can utilize culturally appropriate practices like story circles (Deardorff, 2020) to facilitate open dialogues and create a safe space for individuals to share their narratives and concerns.

5.6 Affirming Cultural Identity and Traditions

Conversions can create internal conflicts for individuals navigating their faith and cultural heritage. Social workers can support individuals by affirming their cultural identities and traditions, recognizing them as valuable aspects of their unique journeys. This can involve encouraging continued engagement with cultural practices alongside their new faith, if applicable, and respecting individual choices regarding cultural expression and adaptation.

5.7 Understanding Intersectional Dynamics

Intersectionality highlights the interconnectedness of various social identities, like ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, in shaping conversion experiences (Rahman & Wong, 2020). Social workers must consider these intersecting factors and their potential impact on individuals. For example, understanding the gender dynamics within the Orang Asli and Santal communities can help social workers ensure support addresses the specific needs and potential vulnerabilities faced by women undergoing conversion.

5.8 Navigating Power Dynamics and Informed Consent

It is vital to be mindful of the power dynamics inherent in conversion experiences, especially considering historical contexts like colonial missionary activities (Brandt, 2011). Social work practice emphasizes informed consent, ensuring individuals freely choose their faith and have access to information about potential consequences and alternative perspectives. This requires a nonjudgmental and empowering approach, enabling individuals to make informed decisions based on their own understanding and values.

5.9 Collaboration and Community Engagement

Collaboration with community leaders, religious leaders, and cultural experts from the Orang Asli and Santal communities is crucial (McFarland & Wehbe-Alamah, 2019). This collaborative approach fosters culturally appropriate support systems and ensures services are developed and delivered in a way that resonates with the communities' values and needs.

5.10 Culturally Competent Interventions

Social workers can utilize various culturally competent interventions to support individuals, such as:

- Culturally adapted group therapy or support groups (Zhang & Zhou, 2019) to create safe spaces for individuals to share experiences and connect with others on similar journeys
- Narrative therapy (Knipper, 2013) to help individuals explore their experiences and develop personal narratives that integrate their faith and cultural identity within a broader context
- Advocacy (Cartwright et al., 2017) for policies and practices that promote religious freedom, cultural sensitivity, and social justice within these communities

Promoting cultural competence is essential for social work practice in addressing the diverse needs of individuals navigating religious conversion within Indigenous communities. By fostering cultural humility, building trust, respecting identities and traditions, and utilizing culturally appropriate interventions, social workers can contribute to the well-being and agency of individuals navigating these complex journeys of faith and cultural identity.

5.11 Ethical Considerations in Conversion for Social Work Practitioners: Some Academic, Development Professional, and Activists' Perspectives

Ethical issues in the context of religious conversion among Indigenous cultures are complex, necessitating a comprehensive awareness of cultural diversity, social justice, and professional accountability. We explore the intricacies of ethical decision-making in social work practice, using ideas from academic research, development professionals, and activists, with a comparative focus on the Orang Asli and Santal communities. Angeletti's (2021) investigation of religious minorities' rights in international law offers a useful foundation for comprehending the ethical imperatives of recognizing multiple religious identities. Religious freedom and cultural autonomy overlap with wider debates of Indigenous rights and land sovereignty among Malaysia's Orang Asli. Similarly, Banerjee's (2020) study on alternative agency among rural women offers light on the ethical implications of enabling marginalized people to make informed decisions about their religious beliefs and practices.

The Santal community in Bangladesh faces comparable ethical quandaries, but within a diverse sociocultural framework. Bhattacharyya's (2019) research on Indigenous identity and nation-building emphasizes the complexity of managing religious conversion within larger narratives of nationhood and cultural

preservation. As the Santal people manage their religious identities in a rapidly changing social milieu, ethical problems connect with issues of heritage, autonomy, and communal cohesiveness. Furthermore, Borup's (2020) investigation of religion, identity politics, and culture invites thought on ownership and representation in religious contexts. This connects strongly with the experiences of both the Orang Asli and Santal communities, as they face external influences and internal discussions regarding the commercialization and preservation of their spiritual traditions. To provide culturally competent and morally sound solutions, social work practitioners must consider viewpoints from academia, development professionals, and activists. Practitioners who embrace the ideas of intersectionality, social justice, and respect for multiple worldviews may encourage meaningful discourse and collaboration within Indigenous communities, encouraging empowerment, autonomy, and well-being.

As we note, the comparison between the Orang Asli in Malaysia and the Santal in Bangladesh highlights some notable differences in the legal and policy frameworks for addressing these ethical issues. Malaysia's recognition of the Orang Asli as Indigenous peoples, its development of ethical research committees, and its legislative safeguards for land rights and cultural heritage provide a more supportive environment for navigating the complexities of religious conversion. In contrast, Bangladesh's approach appears to lack similar legislative protections and acknowledgment of Indigenous rights, posing additional challenges.

The ratification of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) by Malaysia is a positive step (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Yet, there are other acts and regulations that are in practice for Indigenous protection (Hohmann & Weller, 2018), although the non-ratification of ILO Convention 169 suggests there is still room for improvement in fully enshrining Indigenous rights in the legal framework. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA, n.d.), [t]he peoples of the Orang Asli, Orang Ulu and Anak Negeri groups constitute the Indigenous population of Malaysia. While Malaysia adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," the country's Indigenous population faces a number of challenges, especially in terms of land rights. Malaysia has not ratified ILO Convention 169 (Gahlot & Singh, 2024). So, this comparative analysis underscores the importance of tailored, culturally sensitive approaches that balance respect for autonomy, heritage, and communal cohesion within diverse Indigenous contexts.

For Bangladesh, it matters as it shows the Weak Implementation: In case of Santal, while UNDRIP is an important proclamation, it does not have the same legal weight as a ratified international treaty. The ILO Convention 169 establishes a more robust legal framework and accountability procedures to ensure the preservation of indigenous rights. International Pressure: Indigenous rights groups and international organizations have criticized Malaysia's failure to ratify ILO Convention 169, urging firmer commitments to the rights and protection of the country's Orang Asli and other indigenous populations. The lack of institutional recognition and legal safeguards exposes indigenous people, particularly the Santal community, to exploitation and marginalization (Debnath, 2020).

By recognizing these positive developments in Malaysia and contrasting them with the challenges confronting Indigenous communities in Bangladesh, we highlight the importance of government policies, legal frameworks, and ethical oversight mechanisms in promoting ethical responses to religious conversion and protecting Indigenous rights. To summarize, ethical issues in conversion for social work practitioners necessitate a careful mix of cultural sensitivity, professional integrity, and social justice advocacy. By connecting with different points of view and establishing parallels between the Orang Asli and Santal cultures, practitioners may manage the ethical complexities of religious conversion with compassion, understanding, and a dedication to ethical practice. The next section reveals the ethical issue.

5.12 Enhancing Conversion Social Work Practice

In the quest of ethical social work practice, it is critical to address the troubling phenomena of persons who remain silent or feel trapped, perhaps pressured into religious conversion. This mute and confined character shows a breach of not only ethical norms but also individual rights and agency (Tjeltveit, 1986; Wehbi, 2017). These persons, who are frequently swayed by external influences or manipulation, may find themselves in circumstances where their autonomy is jeopardized, creating serious ethical concerns (Tozer & McClanahan, 1999; Halpert, 2000).

Navigating arguments regarding social work interventions, especially in places like Bangladesh, necessitates a deep awareness of context and data. It is critical to avoid generalizations and prejudices in favor of evidence-based research and a thorough understanding of the unique cultural and socioeconomic dynamics at play (Witte Jr & Domingo, 2023; Letteney, 2023; Krumer-Nevo, 2020; Lambert, 2020). Ethical and polite discussion is essential, especially when dealing with delicate themes such as religious conversion. Language choices must be careful to avoid offense, prejudice, or dependence on unverified assertions (Juujärvi et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2023).

In conclusion, ethical social work practice requires prioritizing individuals' well-being and autonomy while adhering to ethical principles. Practices that violate these values, such as those that prolong silence or confinement, must be critically examined and addressed in order to promote ethical social work practice in all circumstances. Engaging with religious conversion within Indigenous communities raises complex ethical concerns for social work practitioners. This chapter explores the diverse perspectives of academics, development professionals, and activists on this subject, considering contemporary considerations alongside relevant discussions dates back to 2000.

5.13 Respecting Individual Autonomy and Informed Consent

A paramount ethical principle is upholding the individual's right to choose their religious path freely (Tjeltveit, 1986). Social workers must avoid exerting undue influence or coercion, ensuring conversions are based on informed consent and a genuine understanding of the implications. This necessitates providing individuals with access to diverse information and perspectives, including potential cultural and social consequences surrounding conversion.

5.14 Navigating Power Dynamics and Vulnerability

Indigenous communities often face historical and ongoing marginalization (Krumer-Nevo, 2020), making them potentially vulnerable to manipulation or exploitation in the context of conversion. Social workers must be mindful of these power dynamics and their potential influence on individual decisions. This includes critically examining the motivations of religious groups and ensuring interventions prioritize the well-being and agency of individuals within these communities.

5.15 Cultural Sensitivity and Respect for Traditions

Conversion experiences, especially when accompanied by pressure to abandon cultural practices, can create internal conflicts for individuals (Banerjee, 2020). Ethical practice necessitates *respecting cultural traditions and identities*, even if they differ from the practitioner's own beliefs. This involves understanding the specific cultural context of the Indigenous community and avoiding judgments or attempts to dismantle established traditions.

5.16 Intersectionality and Addressing Inequalities

Religious conversion experiences are intricately linked to various social identities like ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status (Angeletti, 2021). Social workers must adopt an intersectional lens (Wang et al. 2022) to understand how these factors intertwine and potentially influence conversion decisions. This necessitates recognizing the unique challenges faced by individuals based on their intersecting identities and ensuring interventions address potential inequalities within the community.

5.17 Collaboration and Community Engagement

Ethical practice requires collaboration and engagement with the Indigenous communities involved (Ko et al., 2023). This involves involving community leaders, religious figures, and cultural experts in decision-making processes and ensuring interventions align with the values and priorities of the community. Social workers have an ethical obligation to advocate for religious freedom and social justice within Indigenous communities (Juujärvi et al., 2020). This can involve advocating for policies that protect the rights of religious minorities, addressing discriminatory practices, and promoting inclusive environments where diverse religious identities are respected and valued.

Ethical considerations in conversion for social work practitioners necessitate a nuanced approach that balances acknowledging individual autonomy with safeguarding their well-being and respecting their cultural contexts. By remaining mindful of power dynamics, fostering cultural sensitivity, and advocating for social justice, social workers can ensure ethical and responsible engagement with individuals navigating religious conversion within Indigenous communities.

In Bangladesh, the case of the Santal community reflects the intersection of religious conversion with legal and intellectual frameworks. As outlined in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Law* (Witte Jr & Domingo, 2023), legal considerations play a significant role in the context of religious conversion, shaping both individual rights and community dynamics. Additionally, Letteney (2023) underscores the intellectual dimensions of conversion, highlighting how knowledge systems and cultural paradigms undergo transformation alongside religious shifts. In the Santal community, these dynamics likely manifest in complex ways, influencing social structures, legal rights, and intellectual discourses surrounding religious identity and conversion.

This collaborative approach fosters trust and ensures respect for the community's autonomy and self-determination.

5.18 Scholarly Case Studies and Local Individuals as Examples

This section highlights individuals and scholarly figures who champion social justice and interfaith collaboration.

5.18.1 *Social Work Professors Advocating for Religious Minorities*

- Dr. Edith M. Freeman: A renowned professor and activist dedicated to social justice and advocating for marginalized communities, including religious minorities. Her research explores the intersection of religion, culture, and social work practice.

- Dr. Najeeba Syeed-Miller: A professor of interfaith education, Dr. Syeed-Miller focuses on promoting understanding and cooperation among diverse religious communities. Known for her work in conflict resolution, she actively advocates for the rights of religious minorities in various cultural contexts.
- Dr. Nalini Negi: Specializing in diversity, equity, and inclusion, Dr. Negi researches the experiences of religious minorities in the United States. She actively advocates for addressing discrimination and promoting religious freedom.
- Dr. Mona M. Amer: An associate professor focusing on immigrant and refugee communities, Dr. Amer's research explores topics like acculturation, identity formation, and mental health disparities among diverse religious groups.
- Dr. Sobia Khan: Specializing in international social work and human rights, Dr. Khan conducts research on the intersection of religion and social welfare policies in regions with religious minority populations.

5.18.2 Muslim Scholars and Social Workers Promoting Interfaith Collaboration

Scholars

- Dr. Tariq Ramadan: A Swiss-Egyptian scholar and philosopher, Dr. Ramadan advocates for interfaith dialogue and understanding between Islam and the West. He emphasizes respecting religious diversity and building bridges between faith communities.
- Dr. Aref Ali: An Indian Islamic scholar and activist, Dr. Ali promotes interfaith dialogue and social justice, advocating for peaceful coexistence and collaboration between different religious communities in India.
- Dr. Aminah Beverly McCloud: An American Islamic scholar and professor emerita, Dr. McCloud contributes significantly to interfaith dialogue through her research and writings. She emphasizes the common values shared by different religions and promotes understanding and cooperation across faith traditions.

Social Workers

- Dr. Najeeba Syeed-Miller: (previously mentioned; see Social Work Professors Advocating for Religious Minorities).
- Dr. Humera Khan: A social worker and activist based in Canada, Dr. Khan works toward interfaith cooperation and social justice. She actively promotes interfaith dialogue and collaboration to address social issues impacting diverse communities.
- Dr. Shereen El Feki: An Egyptian social worker and researcher, Dr. El Feki focuses on building peace within and between communities. She promotes interfaith dialogue and understanding through her work with diverse groups, including religious minorities.

5.19 Conclusion

In this chapter, we emphasized the vital relevance of intersectionality, cultural competency, and ethical awareness in social work practice, including in contexts of conversion among Indigenous communities. Recognizing the diverse nature of people's experiences allows social workers to better navigate the complexities of conversion processes. Cultural competency requires respectful interaction with varied cultural ideas, while ethical concerns prioritize individual liberty and well-being. Integrating these concepts enables social workers to effectively serve those undergoing conversion while maintaining ethical standards and promoting social justice. As practitioners continue to engage in reflective practice and multidisciplinary cooperation, they play an important role in creating inclusive, empowering settings for religious minorities in Indigenous communities.

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Chapter 6

Restoring, Rewriting and Re-righting: An Ethnological/Comparative Appraisal



6.1 Introduction: Breaking the Shell of Power-Science-Development-Trade of Social Work

Social work plays an important role in tackling the many issues encountered by marginalized people, such as Malaysia's Indigenous Orang Asli communities (Ngui et al., 2022). Poverty, restricted access to education and health care, and cultural loss are among issues that these people face as a result of their colonial heritage. Effective social work practice necessitates a thorough awareness of Orang Asli cultural subtleties, allowing individuals to fight for their rights (Masoga & Shokane, 2019). Despite obstacles, social workers can promote holistic development and social justice through culturally competent practices (Muller, 2020). This chapter examines the relationship of power, science, development, and trade in order to restore and preserve Santal identity and legacy. It uses fundamental works such as Bailey's *Tribe, Caste, and Nation* (Bailey, 1960) and Geertz's *Old Societies and New States* (Geertz, 1963) to highlight the intricate dynamics. This chapter embarks on a multifaceted examination. First, it digs into the vital work of reviving the collective memory of the Orang Asli and Santal communities, promoting a feeling of shared identity and historical continuity. Second, it addresses the complex process of rebuilding their clouded past and dealing with the long-term ramifications of historical trauma. The chapter then delves into the process of regaining their lost history and recognizing these groups' vital contributions. Building on this foundation, a complete approach for establishing societal peace is provided, using case studies from Malaysia and Bangladesh.

6.2 Restoring the Collective Memory of Orang Asli and the Santal

The collective memory of Malaysia's Indigenous Orang Asli population is a complex tapestry of oral traditions, spiritual practices, and cultural rites passed down through generations (Cai, 2020). However, historical upheavals like as colonization and modernity have damaged this memory, requiring its rehabilitation. Recognizing the importance of collective memory in safeguarding cultural identity, social workers support projects to revive oral traditions, document cultural practices, and promote educational programs (Ng, 2021; Giosa, 2020). Social workers interact with community leaders and cultural specialists to support storytelling sessions and cultural documentation initiatives that revive traditional practices and capture oral histories (Simpong et al., 2018). They also lead educational programs, including Orang Asli viewpoints into mainstream education to promote cultural literacy (Giosa, 2020). Addressing past traumas and supporting healing within communities are critical components, with social workers leading culturally appropriate therapy treatments and reconciliation processes (Ng, 2021). Empowering the Orang Asli to take the lead in memory restoration is critical for ensuring that programs are guided by community ambitions and needs (Ng, 2021). Social workers also work together to conserve holy locations and cultural spaces, which protect tangible expressions of communal memory and enable the continuance of spiritual activities (Cai, 2020). Through these efforts, social workers help to strengthen the Orang Asli and Santal's resilience and cultural vibrancy, ensuring that their rich cultural inheritance is preserved for future generations and transform these communities from a sub-human condition (Uddin, 2022).

Restoring the collective memory of the Santal people is a difficult task that necessitates a thorough grasp of their historical and cultural legacy (Ali, 1998; Anwar, 1984; Culshaw, 1949). Santals, native to Bangladesh, have a complex cultural tapestry that includes traditional rituals, oral histories, and spiritual beliefs (Hossain & Sedeque, 1984). However, centuries of colonialism and sociocultural change have made it difficult to preserve their collective memory (Karim & Mahbub, 2000; Maloney, 1974). Efforts to rebuild the Santal collective memory must include regaining Indigenous voices and knowledge (Debnath, 2023). Social professionals, together with anthropologists and community leaders, play an important role in helping the restoration process (Samad, 1984; Shelly, 1992). Collaborative activities, such as cultural documentation projects and educational programs, seek to revive traditional practices, record oral histories, and improve cultural literacy among Santal communities (Sarkar, 1998; Siddiquee, 1984). Furthermore, addressing past traumas and encouraging healing within Santal communities are critical components of memory restoration initiatives (Siddiquee, 1998). Social professionals help Santal's resilience and cultural vibrancy by addressing past injustices and providing emotional support (Dalton, 1973). Empowering Santal residents to take the lead in memory restoration guarantees that activities are guided by community

goals and needs. Through these joint efforts, the Santal people may recover and preserve their rich cultural heritage for future generations.

6.3 Rewriting the Lost History and Historical Trauma

The Orang Asli, Malaysia's Indigenous people, have a past marred by colonization and long-lasting trauma (Wong et al., 2019). European colonization upended their life via resource exploitation, forced labor, and cultural assimilation (Ibrahim, 2020). Policies aimed at integrating them into mainstream culture weakened their cultural fabric and destroyed links with their history (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2018). This historical tragedy continues to affect Orang Asli communities. Forced relocations owing to construction projects have severed their connection to ancestral lands, which is fundamental to their identity and spirituality (Ng, 2021). This, along with coerced integration, has led to cultural amnesia, with Indigenous traditions and languages dying out over time (Simpong et al., 2018). Recognizing past trauma and its intergenerational transmission is necessary for addressing these deeply embedded difficulties (Giosa, 2020). Social workers and mental health experts must collaborate with communities to promote healing, reestablish cultural identities, and break the cycle of trauma transmission.

Moving ahead, remembering the past is critical for breaking down stereotypes and cultivating a commitment to restorative justice (Ng, 2021). This difficult trip provides a chance for healing, reconciliation, and the restoration of the Orang Asli's agency and dignity. By remembering previous pain, we pledge to create a future in which people may thrive with cultural pride and a restored sense of self. Rewriting the lost past and resolving historical trauma within the Bangladeshi Santal community is a key endeavor that requires a thorough grasp of their sociocultural environment and experiences (Patra, 2023). Centuries of colonization, socioeconomic marginalization, and cultural absorption have erased and distorted Santal history and identity (Debnath, 2023). Social workers, working with anthropologists and community stakeholders, play an important role in this process (Hossain & Sedeque, 1984). Attempts to rewrite Santal history entail recovering Indigenous narratives and contesting mainstream historical narratives that marginalize or conceal their experiences (Sarkar, 1998). Santal voices can be raised and acknowledged through joint research projects and oral history initiatives (Samad, 1984). Furthermore, treating historical trauma necessitates culturally relevant therapy treatments and discourse procedures (Siddiquee, 1998).

Furthermore, educational programs that include Santal ideas into mainstream curriculum are critical for addressing historical misconceptions and encouraging intercultural understanding (Karim & Mahbub, 2000). By recovering their historical agency and cultural legacy, the Bangladeshi Santal community may heal from past injustices and create a future based on cultural pride and resilience. Through collaborative and culturally aware techniques, social workers help to reclaim lost histories and promote healing and empowerment in the Santal community.

6.4 The Lost Heritage of Malaysia's Orang Asli and the Santal

The Orang Asli, Malaysia's Indigenous people, are silently losing their traditions as a result of past injustices, land displacement, and industrialization (Gan, 2022). Their ancestral lands, which were formerly integral to their cultural activities, are disappearing (Razak et al., 2023). This involves degradation of:

Traditional Knowledge: Sustainable practices, herbal medicine, and ecological awareness are under threat (Razak et al., 2023).

Linguistic Diversity: Unique languages and oral traditions, which carry cultural subtleties and history, are disappearing (Abdullah & Ahmad, 2019).

Cultural Practices: Rituals related to life cycles and spirituality are under threat, undermining the cultural fabric and intergenerational transmission (Abdullah & Ahmad, 2019).

Artistic Expressions: Individual crafts and visual arts that show their relationship to nature and individuality fear extinction (Sandran, 2022).

Modernization and development initiatives worsen the loss by altering the environment and disconnecting cultural relationships (Ahmad et al., 2021). Addressing this involves collaboration among Orang Asli, social workers, cultural activists, scholars, and legislators (Chou, 2018). Initiatives such as community-led documentation and cultural education programs might assist to revitalize their heritage. The Santal, an Indigenous people largely found in India and Bangladesh, have the issue of conserving their culture in the face of modernization and historical marginalization (Gautam, 1973; Ali, 1998). Their distinctive cultural environment, which is inextricably linked to their ancestral lands, traditions, and language, is under threat of extinction (Anwar, 1984). The Santal way of life, which is historically based on a connection to the land, is being disturbed. Dalton (1973) and Hossain and Sedeque (1984) conducted studies that documented the social and cultural changes brought about by external factors, which resulted in the disintegration of traditional traditions that were important to their identity. This includes a deterioration of:

Rituals and Ceremonies: Practices related to life cycles and spiritual beliefs that are essential for conveying cultural values and knowledge are disappearing (Jana, 2001).

Indigenous Knowledge: Generations of competence in sustainable agriculture, herbal medicine, and ecological awareness are under assault (Das, 1985).

Linguistic Diversity: The Santal language, which carries their distinctive cultural expressions and worldviews, is endangered (Anwar, 1984).

Despite the hurdles, the Santal community is steadfast in maintaining its traditions. Initiatives such as preserving oral histories and cultural practices demonstrate their resolve to recover and pass on their heritage (Karim & Mahbub, 2000). Managing this loss necessitates a diverse strategy. Collaboration among the Santal community, social workers, scholars, and legislators is critical (Cohen, 1978). We can help the

Santal revitalize their strong cultural identity for future generations by recognizing the core causes of heritage loss and encouraging collaborative efforts such as community-led preservation programs. Unraveling the faint echoes of Santal and Orang Asli lost history necessitates recognizing, protecting, and revitalizing their cultural legacy. Understanding and treating the core causes of this loss might help to restore their strong cultural identity.

6.4.1 Case of Malaysia

To meet the needs and rights of the converted Orang Asli community, it is critical to create an inclusive paradigm that values variety, promotes understanding, and protects Indigenous rights and cultural heritage. This approach aspires to promote social fairness, harmony, and human rights while allowing individuals to make a significant contribution to Malaysian society as a whole.

The approach aims to create an inclusive society that values many cultures, religions, and identities, including that of converted Orang Asli. It promotes mutual tolerance and acceptance among diverse populations.

6.5 An Inclusive Model for Social Harmony

6.5.1 Case of Malaysia

Encourage community understanding and empathy. Oral history initiatives, archival research, and community storytelling sessions can all help to deepen our awareness of the Orang Asli's past, struggles, and contributions.

The concept prioritizes preserving indigenous rights and safeguarding the cultural legacy of the Orang Asli. Cultural heritage preservation, language revitalization programs, and traditional arts and crafts revival can all help to preserve a community's culture.

Building links across communities promotes societal peace. This can be accomplished through land rights activism, cultural education efforts, critical review of historical records, and the inclusion of indigenous voices in decision-making processes.

The model advocates for the ratification of ILO Convention No. 169, which protects the rights of indigenous and tribal communities. Ratification would bring legal protection and recognition to the Orang Asli people.

Efforts should be undertaken to restore the collective memory of the Orang Asli and address whatever historical trauma they have endured. This can include actions like rewriting lost history, encouraging healing and reconciliation, and questioning prevailing narratives. Advocating for new policies to preserve the rights and welfare of converted Orang Asli is vital. This involves teaching Ustaz (Islamic religious leaders) and nongovernmental organization (NGO) experts to better understand the

community’s specific needs and circumstances, as well as assuring access to social services.

To fully engage in Malaysian society, converted Orang Asli require an inclusive paradigm of social harmony (Fig. 6.1). By accepting variety, encouraging understanding, protecting Indigenous rights, and bridging communities, this approach seeks to achieve social justice, social peace, and human rights for everyone, producing an inclusive and cohesive community

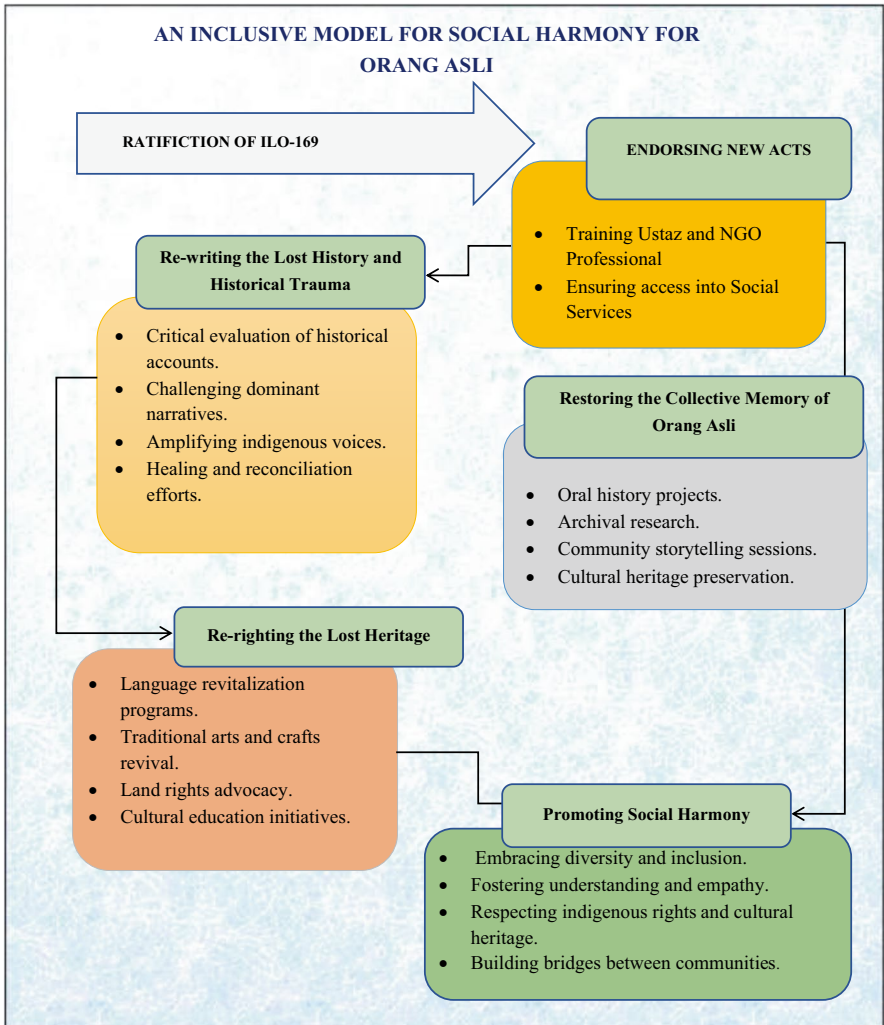


Fig. 6.1 An inclusive model for the Orang Asli. (Source: Author’s compilation)

6.5.2 Case of Bangladesh

To promote social harmony and inclusivity for the Santal community, an inclusive model is essential. This model encompasses embracing diversity, fostering understanding, respecting Indigenous rights and cultural heritage, building bridges between communities, and advocating for necessary legal frameworks. Key suggestions include the ratification of UNDRIP and ILO-169, as well as the amendment of the Small Ethnic Minority Group Act-2010.

6.5.2.1 Components of the Inclusive Model for the Santal community

Embracing Diversity and Inclusion: The model emphasizes the importance of embracing diversity and creating an inclusive society that values the unique cultural identity of the Santal community. It promotes acceptance, respect, and equal opportunities for all.

Fostering Understanding and Empathy: Efforts should be made to foster understanding and empathy between the Santal community and the wider society. Oral history projects, archival research, community storytelling sessions, and cultural education initiatives can bridge the gap and promote a deeper appreciation of the Santal heritage.

Respecting Indigenous Rights and Cultural Heritage: The model recognizes and respects the Indigenous rights and cultural heritage of the Santal community. This includes initiatives such as cultural heritage preservation, language revitalization programs, and traditional arts and crafts revival to safeguard their rich cultural legacy.

Building Bridges Between Communities: Building bridges between the Santal community and other communities is crucial for social harmony. This can be achieved through land rights advocacy, critical evaluation of historical accounts, challenging dominant narratives, and amplifying Indigenous voices in decision-making processes.

Ratification of UNDRIP and ILO-169: The model strongly advocates for the ratification of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169. These international agreements provide crucial legal protections for Indigenous peoples, including the Santal community.

Restoring Collective Memory and Re-righting Lost Heritage: Efforts should be made to restore the collective memory of the Santal community and rectify any historical injustices they may have faced. This involves rewriting the lost heritage, promoting healing and reconciliation, and ensuring the Santal narrative is accurately represented.

Endorsing New Acts: The model suggests endorsing new acts, such as amending the Small Ethnic Minority Group Act, 2010, to better protect the rights and welfare of the Santal community. This includes training NGO professionals, ensuring

access to social services, and empowering researchers to study and address the specific needs of the Santal community.

An inclusive model for social harmony is crucial for the Santal community's well-being and their contribution to society (Fig. 6.2). By embracing diversity, fostering understanding, respecting Indigenous rights, and building bridges between communities, this model strives to establish social justice, cultural preservation, and harmony for the Santal community. The ratification of UNDRIP and ILO-169,

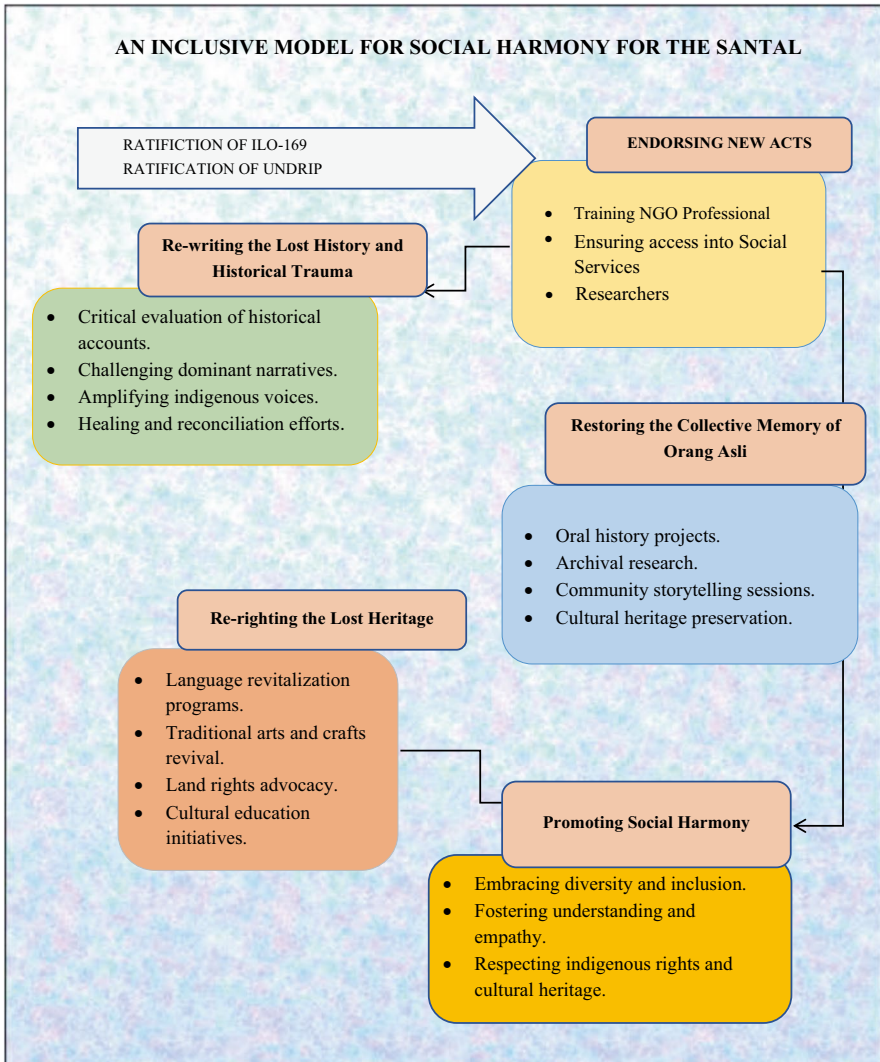


Fig. 6.2 An inclusive model for the Santal community. (Source: Author's compilation)

along with endorsing new acts, will strengthen legal protections and ensure the Santal community's rights are upheld.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

The Orang Asli of Malaysia and the Santal populations of India and Bangladesh confront comparable issues in sustaining their distinct cultural identities. Both communities have faced historical marginalization, relocation from ancestral areas, and the loss of traditional knowledge and customs. Despite these challenges, both communities have shown amazing tenacity in their efforts to recover and revitalize their past. Moving forward, mitigating the loss of cultural assets necessitates a diverse strategy. Collaboration among the Orang Asli, Santal communities, social workers, scholars, and legislators is critical. By recognizing the core causes of heritage loss, encouraging collaborative efforts such as community-led preservation programs, and supporting inclusive development models, we can help these communities revitalize their strong cultural identities for future generations. In Malaysia, this entails recognizing Orang Asli land rights, promoting multicultural understanding, and guaranteeing equal involvement in decision-making processes. In Bangladesh, it is critical to accommodate the Santals' special needs through education, language revival programs, and sustainable development projects. Finally, attaining social peace necessitates a dedication to fairness, inclusion, and respect for the varied cultural fabric created by Indigenous people such as the Orang Asli and the Santal. This guarantees not just their survival but also their capacity to grow and contribute their distinct viewpoints to the fabric of their individual countries.

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Chapter 7

Conclusion: “Righting Wrong”—How Long?



7.1 A Transformation Is a Call for Social Workers: Can We Be Reciprocal?

As a result of our interactions with the Santal and Orang Asli communities, we have come to recognize the transformative potential and necessity of reciprocal research. The significance of shattering the facade of science, power, development, and commerce in social work is examined in this chapter. It also underscores the necessity of reclaiming their misplaced cultural heritage and highlights the significance of rewriting the forgotten past and restoring the collective memory of these communities. This raises the following inquiry: Are social workers capable of engaging in reciprocal research efforts?

A call to collaborate, share knowledge, and demonstrate a mutuality that, as a whole, constitutes “reciprocity” in research. As reciprocity enables the co-creation of knowledge, Chowdhury et al. (2022a) assert that it is a crucial component of research. We suggest implementing the self-repairing model (Chowdhury et al., 2022a, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c), which places significant emphasis on the spiritual and self-esteem aspects of our endeavors, in order to initiate this mutually beneficial voyage. Volunteering and standing with the communities we serve while advocating for them is the only way to genuinely exemplify reciprocity (Siraz et al., 2020). This method demonstrates a profound dedication to social justice and transcends our professional responsibilities. We can actively aid in the dismantling of oppressive structures by addressing institutional, systemic, and intrapersonal manifestations of racism that are deeply ingrained in society (Currie, 2024).

Righting wrongs, the uneven, unorthodox phrase; however, if we understand that our education system is teaching us justified self-interest, which is against the spirit of the Global South: Commoning the community. Our reviewers, with all respect, have misunderstood this too. We have taken this from the masterpiece of Gayatri Spivak, See Spivak, GC. (2004), later reprinted in 2012. Spivak, G. C. (2004). Righting wrongs. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(2), 523–581.

Furthermore, reciprocity is vitally important when it comes to our ethnic backgrounds and academic endeavors. In accordance with the principles of integrity, justice, and compassion, we can harmonize our conduct by adhering to ethical guidelines and adopting virtue ethics (Chowdhury et al., 2022a). We can establish meaningful connections with the communities we serve and cultivate trust by exemplifying these virtues. It is imperative that we make every effort to include the Santal and Orang Asli communities in the deliberations that shape public policy. This methodology corresponds to the notion of knowledge democracy, which places importance on the inclusion and consideration of a wide range of viewpoints and voices (Chowdhury et al., 2022a; Hall, 2015; Tandon & Hall, 2021; Lepore et al., 2023). More inclusive and equitable outcomes may result from advocating for policy changes that address the unique needs and obstacles of these communities. This book puts forth the notion of embracing reciprocity as an alternative to unidirectional research practices. This entails actively participating in research initiatives alongside communities as equitable collaborators.

7.2 Reciprocity in Indigenous Land

Moving beyond one-sided research practices, the chapter proposes a commitment to reciprocity. This involves engaging with communities as equal partners in research projects. This includes:

- **Spiritual Self-Esteem:** Applying the JR self-repairing model (Chowdhury et al., 2022a) to empower communities to build their own confidence and resilience
- **Volunteerism:** Embracing a spirit of service and advocating for the rights and needs of the community, regardless of personal background or research focus (Siraz et al., 2020; Chowdhury et al., 2024b, c)
- **Ihsan in Academia:** Integrating ethical principles like “good deeds for God’s sake” (Chowdhury et al., 2022a) to guide our research practices and ensure ethical treatment of communities
- **Knowledge Democracy:** Advocating for a system where community voices inform policy decisions (Chowdhury et al., 2022b; Hall, 2015; Tandon & Hall, 2021; Lepore et al., 2023)

By adopting these approaches, social workers can move toward a more reciprocal and empowering relationship with the Orang Asli and Santal communities, fostering healing, self-determination, and lasting positive change. This is a stand from a methodological point of view and mitigating “[I]nstitutional, systemic, and intra-personal forms of racism, that are embedded in society through laws, organization, racial preference, inequity, bias and so forth” (Currie, 2024, p.104). Social workers are ultimately called to a paradigm shift when they adopt reciprocity into their research and practice. We can establish a more equitable and all-encompassing society through the dismantling of symbols of authority, the reconstruction of cultural legacy, and the rewriting of historical accounts (see Box 7.1 for Creating a Culturally Responsive Workplace with Indigenousness). We can empower the Santal and Orang Asli communities to reclaim their voices and determine their own futures by

means of knowledge democracy, volunteerism, and ethical behavior. In support of these communities and in pursuit of a more equitable global society, may we wholeheartedly dedicate ourselves to this profound and paradigm-shifting expedition.

7.2.1 Come Together by Names: Orang Asli and Santal

In Peninsular Malaysia, the term “Orang Asli” is frequently applied as an umbrella term to refer to numerous Indigenous communities. In Malaysia, “Small Ethnic Group” refers to the Santal people. However, this homogenization disregards the distinctive identities, languages, and cultural practices of each individual group, which can be problematic.

Box 7.1 Creating a Culturally Responsive Workplace with Indigenousness

Creating a culturally safe space when working with Indigenous communities requires acknowledging and respecting their unique cultural identities (Fernando & Bennett, 2019). By using the proper names and understanding the cultural significance behind them, social workers can establish trust, promote cultural understanding, and provide appropriate support to these communities.

The terms “Orang Asli” and “Santal” can unintentionally mask the rich diversity within these communities in Malaysia. While these terms may be widely used, relying on them as single labels overlooks the distinct identities, languages, and cultural practices of each individual group (Seed-Pihama, 2019). This can contribute to harmful generalizations and undermine the right of these communities to self-determination (Ablavsky & Allread, 2023a). Therefore, it’s crucial to prioritize and respect the self-identifications chosen by the Orang Asli and Santal communities. This demonstrates respect for their cultural autonomy and fosters more meaningful relationships. Utilizing their preferred names acknowledges their unique identities and empowers them to represent themselves authentically.

Religion plays a significant role in the cultural identity of communities. Recognizing and respecting the distinct religious practices and beliefs of the Orang Asli and Santal can contribute to their religious freedom and cultural heritage preservation (Shah & Carpenter, Moffett, Gay). This acknowledgment allows for a deeper understanding of their spirituality and fosters the preservation of their unique traditions.

Acknowledging and respecting the distinct names and cultural identities of the Orang Asli and Santal communities is crucial for promoting cultural pride, self-determination, and equitable representation. By recognizing their unique identities, we can foster a sense of belonging, preserve their cultural heritage and promote meaningful engagement with these communities. Let us come together and embrace the power of names in honoring and celebrating the diversity of our world.

This chapter, and the book as a whole, essentially challenge the usage of “Orang Asli” as a singular designation and underscore the significance of valuing the varied self-identifications that these communities possess. By using “Orang Asli” as a unifying term, the unique histories, languages, and cultural manifestations of each group may be obliterated. Fernando and Bennett (2019) emphasize the criticality of acknowledging cultural variances in order to establish secure and considerate environments for social work involvement. Moreover, the utilization of a singular term carries the potential to sustain detrimental perceptions and impede endeavors aimed at self-governance and the safeguarding of cultural heritage (Dawson et al., 2021). This is consistent with the overarching discourse surrounding the acknowledgment of the varied identities held by Indigenous communities globally, as exemplified in books such as *World Christianity and Indigenous Experience* (Lindenfeld, 2012) and *Perspectives on Indigenous Psychology* (Mohanty & Misra, 2002). On the western definition of Social Work as Tatsuru Akimoto (2024) posed,

[w]hat is international social work? Is it work that concerns other countries [like Malaysia]? To do social work in a colony to make it easier to rule, or to be engaged in missionary work ... (2024, p.7)

It is high time, as we are at the estuary of South-South collaboration, both Malaysia and Bangladesh are having their own Acts relating to Orang Asli and Santal, respectively, and we hope we, seen from a Southern Epistemology, shall be beyond recognizing cultural tolerance. Such biases toward another group may be unconscious. Social workers and researchers should give precedence to recognizing and honoring the self-identifications of these communities rather than imposing an external label. This is consistent with the ethical standards of social work and human rights, which prioritize the autonomy of communities and individuals (Ife, 2022; Musa, 2022). Acknowledging their preferred appellations fosters deeper connections and demonstrates regard for their cultural autonomy. This is consistent with *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I: Beginnings to 1500* (Moffett, 2005), which emphasizes the significance of ethical treatment in research, and the notion of “cultural safety” as defined in Fernando and Bennett (2019). Developing an appreciation for the distinctive cultural contributions of the Orang Asli and Santal communities is facilitated by embracing their multifaceted identities.

7.3 What We Have Done Here and What to Do: Outcome and Future Research

This section outlines the key findings and contributions of the research, summarizing the core arguments and evidence presented throughout the book. It highlights the impact of conversion on Indigenous communities in Malaysia and Bangladesh, emphasizing how these changes affect their cultural and social structures. Additionally, it identifies research gaps and suggests potential avenues for future inquiry. By reflecting on the study’s outcomes and outlining future research

directions, this section aims to deepen the understanding of the complex interplay between faith, culture, and identity in Indigenous contexts. Their diverse heritage is emphasized in Giosa's (2020) languages and traditions. Furthermore, identifying the invaluable expertise that these communities possess concerning sustainable practices, as stressed by Hosen et al. (2020), can make a substantial contribution to initiatives aimed at preserving the environment and adapting to climate change. This is consistent with the increasing acknowledgement of the significance of Indigenous knowledge across disciplines, as exemplified in works such as *Cultural psychology, cross-cultural psychology, and Indigenous psychology* and *Indigenous Psychology of Spirituality* (Dueck, 2021).

7.3.1 *What We Have Done*

What have we discovered when we did this work? In one sentence, both communities are facing challenge in expanding the conventional narratives using current frames—even the idea of a “native” perspective on the Constitution posits something that never existed (Ablavsky & Allread, 2023b). In summary, it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge and honor the identities and names of the Orang Asli and Santal communities, given their profound cultural importance (Hosen et al., 2020). By fostering unity and recognizing the inherent value of these Indigenous peoples' names and identities, productive collaborations and alliances can be formed in reverence for their heritage and diversity (Fernando & Bennett, 2019; Dawson et al., 2021). In order to foster culturally sensitive and ethical interactions with these communities, it is imperative that social workers and researchers transcend the inherent constraints of the “Orang Asli” designation. It is imperative to acknowledge and honor the varied self-identifications of every group in Malaysia in order to cultivate significant connections, advance the cause of self-determination, and appreciate their distinct contributions to the fabric of society.

Concluding the book, we reflect on what has been accomplished thus far and outline potential avenues for future research and action. The exploration of the distinct names and cultural identities of the Orang Asli and Santal communities has shed light on the importance of recognizing and respecting their uniqueness. By acknowledging and using their proper names, we have taken a step toward promoting cultural pride, self-determination, and equitable representation. The outcome of this discussion is twofold. First, it serves as a reminder to social workers, researchers, and practitioners to be mindful of the power of names and the impact they can have on community identity. By using the appropriate names and understanding their cultural significance, we can foster a sense of belonging and empowerment for the Orang Asli and Santal communities. This recognition also opens up opportunities for meaningful engagement and collaboration, enabling us to work alongside these communities in a mutually respectful manner.

7.3.2 *What Are the Nuances*

Advocating for policy changes to recognize and respect Indigenous community identities can face several challenges. These challenges may include:

Historical and Institutional Resistance: Historical biases and deeply ingrained colonial attitudes may pose significant obstacles to policy changes. Institutions and government bodies may be resistant to acknowledging and respecting Indigenous community identities due to long-standing power dynamics and systemic discrimination.

Lack of Political Will: The political landscape and priorities of governments can impact the willingness to enact policy changes. If Indigenous issues are not given sufficient attention or if there is a lack of political will to address them, advocating for policy changes can be challenging.

Limited Representation and Participation: Indigenous communities may face barriers to meaningful participation in policy-making processes. Limited representation and consultation can result in policies that fail to adequately address the needs and aspirations of these communities.

Legal and Jurisdictional Complexities: Indigenous rights and identities can be subject to complex legal frameworks and overlapping jurisdictions. Navigating these complexities can pose challenges in advocating for policy changes that fully recognize and respect Indigenous community identities.

Lack of Awareness and Understanding: Public awareness and understanding of Indigenous issues and the significance of recognizing community identities may be limited. This lack of awareness can hinder the broader support needed to drive policy changes and create an inclusive society.

Resource and Capacity Constraints: Indigenous communities may face resource and capacity constraints, making it challenging to advocate effectively for policy changes. Limited financial resources, access to legal expertise, and organizational capacity can hinder their ability to engage in policy advocacy efforts.

Balancing Cultural Diversity: Indigenous communities are diverse and have unique cultural identities within themselves. Advocating for policy changes that recognize and respect these diverse identities while maintaining unity can be a delicate balance.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from Indigenous communities, civil society organizations, policymakers, and allies. It necessitates building coalitions, raising awareness, empowering Indigenous voices, and working toward inclusive policy-making processes that prioritize the recognition and respect of Indigenous community identities.

7.3.3 *What Needs to Be Done: Veering to a Sustained Thinking*

Moving forward, from the outset of this book, we adopted the decolonial principle, and it was furthered and triggered by the principle of “sustained thinking” as a cornerstone for understanding the complex challenges faced by the Orang Asli and Santal communities. Echoing Voltaire’s assertion, “no problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking” (Morley, 1882), we emphasized in Chap. 1 that we need a transformation in our thought (Mignolo, 2000) and the necessity of persistent, thoughtful engagement with these issues. While historical legacies and systemic factors contribute significantly to the marginalization of the Santal and Orang Asli communities, Voltaire’s assertion that “no problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking” encourages a more proactive approach. By framing the issue through the lens of social inclusion and harmony, we are compelled to challenge existing paradigms and engage in inclusive problem-solving. This requires honoring diverse knowledge systems and meaningfully involving Indigenous communities in decision-making processes. The concept of “sustained thinking” promotes the exploration of alternative approaches rooted in mutual respect and collaboration. Ultimately, addressing the complex challenges faced by these communities necessitates diligent examination, creativity, and a steadfast commitment to inclusivity and diversity. This long discussion, findings and all, reminds us that addressing complex social issues requires diligent examination and creativity, guided by principles of inclusivity and respect for diversity.

How to implement this notion? 1. Problem reframe, such as sustained thinking, enables us to evaluate the subject from several angles rather than perceiving it as a static “problem” of social inclusion or harmony. This entails talking to Orang Asli and Santal people about their lives, goals, and inclusion hurdles. Additionally, studying their marginalization’s historical and social causes is vital. 2. Inclusive thinking requires exploring multiple perspectives and pushing beyond isolated narratives or preconceptions. Academics, legislators, and community people discuss and solve problems together. 3. Research and knowledge sharing are like “sustained thinking”—it demands constant learning and information collecting. Research may help explain cultural behaviors, community needs, historical injustices, and policy gaps. However, ethical research with community agreement is essential. 4. Collaborative solutions, via persistent thought, conversation, knowledge sharing, and cooperation. Stakeholders may co-create culturally sensitive, root-cause-focused solutions that promote real social inclusion for Orang Asli and Santal communities. 5. Education and awareness programs are our call. Imagine that continuous thinking involves creating and implementing education and awareness initiatives to promote Santal and Orang Asli understanding and respect. These programs attempt to challenge preconceptions, promote cultural awareness, and facilitate stakeholder discussion. 6. Capacity building and empowerment, as sustained thinking entails long-term Santal and Orang Asli community capacity building and empowerment. Education and skills training, community-led development, self-determination, and active decision-making are examples.

7.4 The Conclusion: What We Have Done Here and What to Do as Future Research

This book examines the religious conversion narratives of the Orang Asli in Malaysia and the Santals in Bangladesh, revealing their deep cultural, social, and identity effects. Our phenomenological and anthropological methods have enabled us to describe these groups’ lived experiences, demonstrating the complex and frequently destructive nature of religious conversion. In previous chapters, we have shown how conversion has caused identity shifts, language loss, and social structure changes, impacting these Indigenous populations’ cohesiveness and history. Chapter 1 stressed the significance of prolonged thought in resolving these complicated concerns, based on Voltaire’s understanding that persistent meditation may overcome great obstacles. We covered the Orang Asli and Santal populations’ challenges and perseverance against conversion pressures in Chap. 4. These narratives stressed the need for culturally competent solutions that respect Indigenous identities and address socioeconomic and political problems affecting these communities.

Voltaire’s “sustained thinking” may help Indigenous people overcome social inclusion issues, as discussed in Chap. 1 (see Morley, 1882). We can create a more inclusive and fair society via critical thought, open debate, and collaborative problem-solving. The Orang Asli in Malaysia and the Santals in Bangladesh have suffered cultural degradation, identity alterations, and societal upheavals due to religious conversion, as shown in this book. Culturally competent interventions and persistent involvement with these populations are highlighted in the previous chapters. Holistic methods that allow Orang Asli and Santal communities to recover their narratives and histories should guide future study. This entails bringing academic, government, and community stakeholders together to promote cultural preservation, social justice, and equitable development. Innovative methods and frameworks that focus on these people’s perspectives and experiences are essential. Participatory research approaches that stress community participation, co-design, and co-production of knowledge provide more meaningful and lasting results. Future studies should examine how governments and organizations maintain Indigenous names and identities. We can create an inclusive and respectful atmosphere for these groups by campaigning for legislative improvements and involving stakeholders. Gayatri Spivak’s (2004) exhortation to “righting wrongs” supports Voltaire’s claim that “no problem can endure the pressure of sustained thought.” Politicians, intellectuals, and Ihsan practitioners—doing good for God—must think critically. Continuous thinking and cooperation may eliminate Orang Asli and Santal inequalities.

Our Chap. 4 metaphor of society as a birthday cake showed how certain groups get uneven employment, education, and health care. Indigenous individuals face discrimination despite their skills. Understanding and resolving inequality may help us create a fairer society. The Orang Asli and Santal cultures, customs, and knowledge systems must be studied. Future research can help Indigenous people to negotiate the sociopolitical landscape while retaining their cultural identities and social cohesiveness by focusing their viewpoints and goals. This deliberate approach is

essential for sustainable good transformation and social participation. As we end, we must identify future research. First, to understand the wider effects of religious conversion, comparison studies with other Indigenous communities are needed. Such studies should examine how conversion affects cultural preservation and communal cohesiveness over time. Future studies should also encourage culturally competent social work techniques that respect and include Indigenous viewpoints. Social inclusion and cultural preservation need continual interactions between politicians, social workers, and community leaders. We can create a more inclusive and peaceful society by including Indigenous voices in policymaking and development. This careful, continuous approach is necessary for sustainable positive development and Indigenous community well-being. By documenting and preserving their unique practices, we can contribute to the preservation of their cultural heritage and promote cultural continuity.¹ Bob Pease (2002) advised social workers to “challenge the status of their own professional knowledge.” This is crucial for addressing the Orang Asli and Santal communities’ conversion issues, urging professionals to critically reflect and adapt their practices to respect and integrate Indigenous perspectives and experiences.

Rather than solely relying on Western philosophical constructs like Kantian deontology or Aristotelian virtue ethics, addressing the systemic inequalities faced by the Orang Asli and Santal can be rooted in Indigenous Gnoseology. Indigenous Gnoseology (Chowdhury et al., 2022a, 2023, 2024b, 2024c), or Indigenous ways of knowing, emphasizes interconnectedness with the natural world, community, and spirituality. This epistemological framework offers a profound understanding of relationships, responsibilities, and reciprocity that is often overlooked in Western philosophical traditions. By centering Indigenous Gnoseology, we can develop a more nuanced and culturally appropriate approach to addressing the challenges faced by the Orang Asli and Santal. This involves:

- *Reconnecting with the Land:* Recognizing the deep spiritual and cultural connection between Indigenous peoples and their ancestral lands and prioritizing land rights and environmental protection
- *Strengthening Community Bonds:* Fostering collective decision-making and support systems within Indigenous communities to build resilience and agency
- *Preserving Cultural Heritage:* Supporting the transmission of traditional knowledge and practices to future generations to maintain cultural identity and continuity

¹Incorporating Voltaire, “*No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking*,” into discussions in this book about conversion of Santal and Orang Asli communities underscores the need for thoughtful reflection. By framing the issue around social inclusion and harmony, it urges us to challenge existing paradigms and engage in inclusive problem-solving. This involves honoring diverse knowledge systems and involving Indigenous communities in decision-making. “Sustained thinking” encourages the exploration of alternative approaches that prioritize mutual respect and collaboration. Ultimately, Voltaire’s insight reminds us that addressing complex social issues requires diligent examination and creativity, guided by principles of inclusivity and respect for diversity.

- *Establishing Equitable Partnerships*: Collaborating with Indigenous communities on an equal footing to develop and implement solutions that respect their worldviews and aspirations

Building a prosperous and peaceful community requires leveraging everyone’s abilities. Marxism or postcolonialism often hinders fairness. Bob Pease’s (2002) ethical and rational advice for social workers emphasizes evaluating professional expertise through discussion, analysis, and reflection, as proposed in Chap. 6’s reciprocal, inclusive framework. Given that Bangladesh and Malaysia are Muslim-majority nations, we can align our strategy with the concept of Muslim brotherhood. Regardless of ethnicity, everyone desires a world where respect, achievement, recovery, sustainable living, and the creation of favorable conditions are possible. A just society can boost the economy, as educated individuals with decent employment improve economic conditions. Technology and creativity from an educated workforce may boost economic progress, the only way we can reach Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), at least SDG 11, which aims for sustainable cities and communities, and SDG 16, which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions (United Nations, 2015a, b; Yamasaki & Yamada, 2022; Oruç & Çahantimur, 2024).

7.4.1 SDG 16 and the Intersection of Converted Orang Asli of Malaysia and Santal of Bangladesh

The relationship between SDG 16 and the marginalized groups of converted Orang Asli of Malaysia and Santal of Bangladesh can be explored through the following lenses:

1. Peace and Inclusion

- **Marginalization and Discrimination**: These groups often face discrimination, social exclusion, and potential conflict due to their ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds (International Labour Organization, 2020).
- **Land Rights and Conflict**: Disputes over land rights can lead to tensions and conflicts, especially when Indigenous communities like the Orang Asli are involved (Human Rights Watch, 2020).
- **Religious Conversion and Social Harmony**: The conversion of Orang Asli to other religions can sometimes lead to social tensions and conflicts within communities (Chowdhury, 2017).

2. Access to Justice

- **Legal Protection**: These groups may face challenges in accessing legal protection and redress for their rights violations (Chowdhury et al., 2024a).
- **Discrimination in the Justice System**: They might encounter biases and discrimination within the legal system, hindering their ability to seek justice (Chowdhury, 2017).

3. Strong Institutions

- **Inclusive Governance:** Effective and inclusive institutions are crucial for addressing the needs and concerns of marginalized groups (Chowdhury et al., 2024a).
- **Capacity Building:** Strengthening local governance and community-based organizations can empower these groups to participate in decision-making processes (Chowdhury et al., 2024a).
- **Anti-Discrimination Laws:** Implementing and enforcing anti-discrimination laws can protect the rights of Converted Orang Asli and Santal (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Specific Considerations

- **Cultural Rights:** Protecting and promoting the cultural rights of these groups is essential for their identity and well-being (International Labour Organization, 2020).
- **Socioeconomic Development:** Addressing poverty, education, and healthcare disparities among these communities is crucial for their overall development (Chowdhury, 2017).
- **Data Collection:** Gathering accurate and disaggregated data on these populations can help identify their specific needs and challenges (United Nations, 2015a).

In conclusion, SDG 16 provides a framework for addressing the complex issues faced by Converted Orang Asli of Malaysia and Santal in Bangladesh. By promoting peace, justice, and inclusive institutions, it is possible to create a more equitable and sustainable society for all (United Nations, 2015b). The narratives as we depicted earlier are essential for addressing conversion issues affecting the Orang Asli and Santal communities. Praising government efforts to protect Indigenous rights, continuous critical reflection, and adaptation of social work practices are necessary. By integrating Indigenous perspectives and fostering inclusive policies, we can work toward a more equitable society. The government's commitment to cultural preservation and social justice is commendable. Future research and collaborative initiatives will empower these communities, ensuring their voices are heard and respected, leading to sustainable development and social harmony.

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Glossary

Intersectionality Examining conversion through an intersectionality lens reveals how characteristics such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status interact and may exacerbate vulnerabilities during conversion experiences.

Cultural Competence The necessity of developing cultural competence was emphasized, as it allows social workers to understand and respect the diverse cultural and religious traditions of Indigenous populations.

Ethical Consideration Is demanding that social workers uphold individual autonomy, informed consent, and non-maleficence (doing no harm) throughout the conversion process.

Learning from Diverse Perspectives Examining viewpoints from scholars, practitioners, and activists highlighted the importance of continuous communication and collaboration to promote ethical and culturally sensitive approaches to conversion within Indigenous communities. Thus, social workers play a vital role in advocating for those navigating conversion in Indigenous communities. Through ongoing reflection and multidisciplinary cooperation, they provide culturally appropriate solutions that empower individuals while adhering to ethical guidelines. Chapter 6 builds on this by creating an inclusive framework for practice.

Agency The capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices.

Colonialism The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.

Conversion Narratives Stories or accounts that describe the process of changing from one religion or belief system to another. In this context, they often relate to the experiences of Santals who converted to other religions, such as Christianity or Hinduism.

Conversion The process of changing from one religious belief system to another. Within this context, it refers to the Santal people's transitions to different faiths.

- Cultural Deterioration** The decline or loss of aspects of a culture, including traditions, languages, customs, and values. It often results from external pressures such as globalization, modernization, or discrimination.
- Cultural Relativism** The principle that a person's beliefs, values, and practices should be understood based on their own cultural context, not judged against another culture's standards.
- Development** A process of economic growth and social progress that aims to improve the quality of life for people. In this context, it often refers to the policies and projects implemented by governments and international organizations to "develop" Indigenous communities.
- Ethnography** A research method involving immersion in a cultural group to understand its members' lives through observation and participation. In this context, ethnography would be used to study the lived experiences of Santal people, including those related to conversion.
- Identity** The sense of self, including one's beliefs, values, and affiliations. In this context, it refers to the Santal people's collective and individual identities.
- Indigenous Communities** Groups of people who are native to a particular region and have a distinct cultural, social, and political identity. In this context, it refers to the Santal community.
- Lived Experiences** The subjective realities and perspectives shaped by an individual's social, cultural, and historical context. In this case, it refers to the personal narratives of Santal people as they navigate religious conversion.
- Participant Observation** A research method where the researcher becomes actively involved in the lives of the people being studied.
- Power Dynamics** The ways in which power is distributed and exercised within and between groups.
- Preserve Traditional Knowledge** To protect and maintain the body of knowledge, innovations, practices, representations, and expressions, as well as the tools, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces, which embody the collective intellectual property and creations of communities, originating from their ancestors and transmitted from generation to generation.
- Resilience** The capacity of a person or group to recover quickly from difficulties; the ability to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions. In the context of Indigenous cultures, it refers to the ability to maintain identity and cultural practices despite challenges.
- Santal** An Indigenous tribal group primarily inhabiting the regions of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar in India, as well as parts of Bangladesh. Renowned for their rich cultural heritage, distinct language, and strong communal bonds, the Santal have faced significant challenges due to historical and ongoing processes of colonialism, development, and religious conversion. Their resilience and determination to preserve their identity and way of life have made them a subject of scholarly and activist interest.

Social Work Practice A profession focused on promoting human well-being and meeting basic human needs by linking people with community, government, and voluntary services. In this context, social work practices would be applied to understand and support the Santal community, particularly in the context of religious conversion.

Thick Description A nuanced and detailed exploration of cultural practices and meanings, going beyond surface-level observations. It involves delving into the complexities of human behavior, interpreting symbols, and understanding the underlying cultural logic. Thick description aims to capture the richness and depth of a culture, providing insights into the motivations, beliefs, and values that shape people's actions. It is a central tool in ethnographic research, allowing researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the cultural context and the lived experiences of individuals within that context.

Index

C

Changes, 8, 17, 20, 21, 24, 31, 32, 41, 42, 57, 63, 69, 74, 88, 90, 100, 102–104, 106
Colonialism, 7, 8, 33, 37, 57–59, 63–68, 73, 88
Community involvement, 59
Conversion, 1, 17, 30, 51, 73, 102
Conversion narratives, 3, 4, 11, 31, 51–69, 106
Cooperation, 37, 52, 76, 83, 84, 105, 106
Cultural competency, 11, 12, 73, 75, 76, 84
Cultural deterioration, 90
Cultural perpetuation, 4

D

Development, 1, 7, 12, 26, 32, 40, 42, 44, 51–62, 64–67, 74, 78–80, 87, 90, 95, 99, 105–109

E

Ethical concerns, 22, 80, 84
Ethics, 68, 69, 100, 107
Ethnography, 2, 7–10, 22, 23, 25, 31, 43, 45, 54, 62, 75

I

Identities, 2, 4–8, 10, 11, 18–21, 25, 29–33, 42–44, 46, 48, 51–61, 63, 64, 67, 73–75, 77–79, 81–83, 87–91, 93, 95, 101–104, 106, 107, 109

Indigenous communities, 1–2, 4–6, 12, 21, 22, 25, 26, 32, 33, 37, 40–42, 46, 53–55, 64, 66, 69, 73, 76, 78–82, 84, 101, 102, 104, 105, 107, 108
Indigenous identities, 17, 21, 56, 74, 78, 106
Intersectionality, 2, 7, 12, 33, 67, 73–75, 77, 79, 81, 84

L

Lived experiences, 2, 4, 5, 18, 20, 25, 26, 55–57, 68

O

Orang Asli, 1, 17, 29, 68, 73, 87, 99

P

Phenomenology, 4–5, 17, 18, 20, 37
Preserve traditional knowledge, 10, 32, 42, 107

R

Reciprocity, 24, 25, 69, 99–102, 107
Religious conversion, 2, 9–12, 18, 19, 22, 31, 32, 46, 47, 51, 55–57, 62, 63, 73–76, 78–82, 106–108
Resilience, 32, 37, 41–44, 46, 48, 53, 67, 69, 88, 89, 100, 107

S

Santals, 2, 17, 51, 73, 87, 99

Social harmony, 12, 68, 91–95, 108, 109

Social justice, 11, 67, 75, 78–80, 82–84, 87,
92, 94, 99, 106, 109

Social work practice, 10, 12, 67, 73–84, 87