Ethnographic Research as Social Work Practice: A problematised study of socio-cultural tensions and conflicts experienced by the Orang Asli communities of Tasik Chini, Malaysia

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Introduction
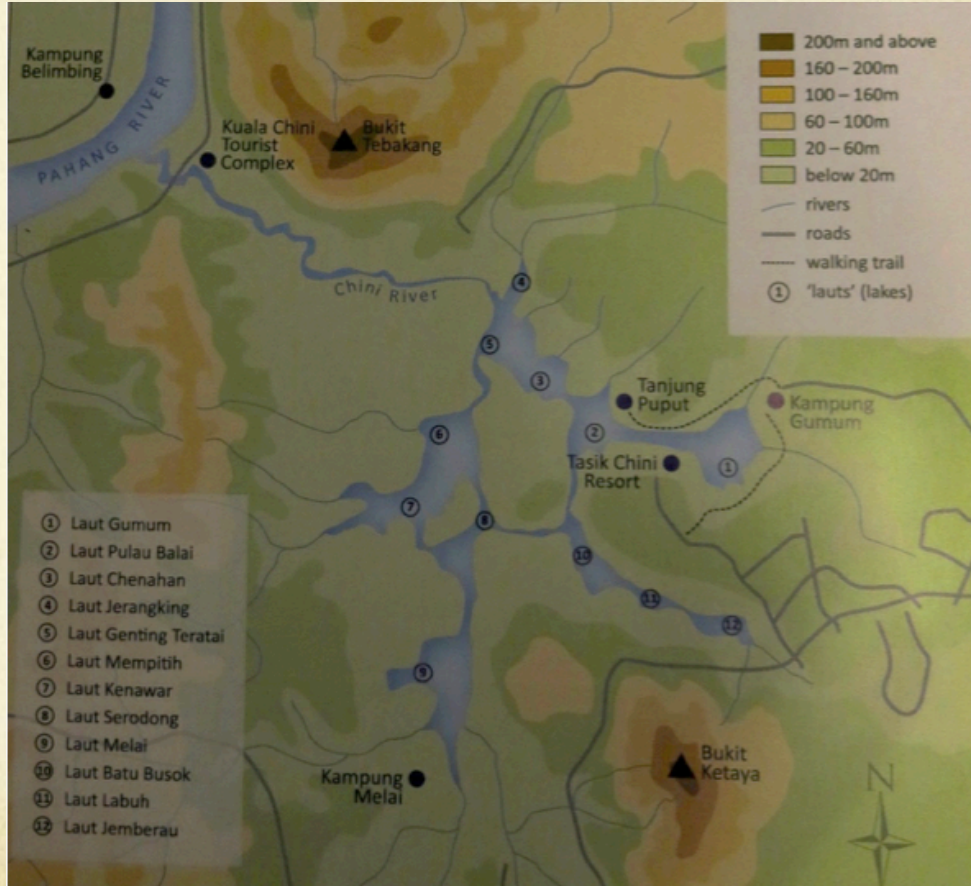
- Background to the ethnography

- Findings

- How might we understand this?

- Linking this to social work, social justice and engaged ethnography

State of Pahang, West Malaysia

The beauty of Tasik Chini

Bio-diverse wetlands

Today at Tasik Chini

Destruction and desecration

Who are those responsible?

The *kampungs* and their people

The study

Ethnography: Condensed -
                   Engaged -
                   Family -

Ethnographic study of Orang Asli at Tasik Chini: – fieldtrips, interviews, focus groups, ethno-philosophy, critical observation & 'children interviewing children'

Ethical approvals – complex and 'situational'

A case for engaged ethnography

United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People

Development as a means of control & oppression

Discrimination – (personal, social & structural)

Misunderstanding and ignorance

Invisibility

Denial of land rights/ lifestyle rights

Problematising the ethnography 1

- 'outsider' status and power relations
  - head man (*Tok Batin*)
  - 'allowing' voices
  - positionality

- Value based and 'engaged'

- Immersion – 'standing in their shoes'

- 'Just another researcher'

Why Tasik Chini?

○ Little work on Orang Asli of Tasik Chini

○ Rebalancing scientific and human in research

Findings

- How the OA are perceived
- Malaysian Gov policies - assimilation
- Struggles for recognition and voice
- Dispossession and poverty traps
- Anger, loss and grief
- Grassroots social activism
- Betrayal and loss of trust
- Capitalism and commoditisation
- The rhetoric of 'DEVELOPMENT'
- Fear of repercussions
- 'Representivity' and staying voiceless

Theorising so far (1)

○ Clash of civilisations? (Huntington???)

○ Binaries – 'this or that', 'one or the other' (Levi-Strauss)

  ○ Modernisation vs traditional
  ○ Power of size: big industry vs local
  ○ Voice of individual vs received power

○ Globalisation, modernisation, anomie (learned helplessness)

○ Liminality – being 'in-between' (Turner, van Gennep)

Problematising the ethnography 2

- Restricted time

- Positionality and power (again)

- Discourses of backwardness
    - ('tell a lie often enough and it becomes the truth' Lenin/ Goebels???)

'And after all they are just Aslis. Give them some curry puffs, tea and nasi goring and you can just silence them'

A FELDA sponsored 'house' for a family of six

Refrigerators as compensation after the floods

A model for just ethnographic social work practice

Theorising so far (2) - Things to resist: towards dialectics

○ Illegitimised truths, conflict: Marxist perspectives

○ Hegemony of isomorphic tendencies (DiMaggio & Powell)

○ Dialectics – conflict to new ways of being

Conflict and homogenisation and alternative approaches to resolution can lead to change

- Positionality and reflexivity

- Mandate and permissions – start with the person
  - Whose agenda?
  - Parameters and timescales of the work

- Dealing with the social and the structural

- Situation ethics

Social justice/social work and engaged ethnography?
'*AESThETICS*'

- *Activism* and social research

- *Ethics* and social research

- *Social justice* and post-post-colonial research

- *Theorising* for better practice

- *Empowering* communities

- *Training and education*

- *Inclusion*

- *Criticality*

- *Support*