

Uncovering The Rich Culture Of The Mah Meri People: A Journey Of Art And Tradition



The Orang Asli's art is more than just a creative outlet; it also reflects their enduring ties to their homeland, identity, and culture. It serves to preserve their rich legacy and pass it down to subsequent generations. Through connecting with people via their emotions of joy, sadness, love, and even sickness, the Orang Asli mastered the art of communication. For them, art is a way of life that inspires and entralls people around them as well as a means of self-expression. They are free to pursue their passions daily, to use their creativity, and to impart their special worldview to others. The desire for differential rights for Orang Asli people still exists although Orang Asli artists attempt to make their work accessible to the public. The artwork highlights the longstanding and ignored issues that continue to afflict them. This initiative could be perceived, rightly or wrongly, as mere tokenism aimed at giving a feel-good impulse to the Orang Asli affected by the displacement. There are countless Orang Asli-related topics and issues on arts and culture that are rarely discussed in the media because that is not the dominant narrative.

In an effort to understand the rich heritage and culture of Orang Asli within Peninsular Malaysia, 14 students from Year 2 Bachelor of Public Relations (Honours), Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT) KL Campus took the opportunity to visit the Mah Meri Cultural Village, located on the coastline of Pulau Carey, Selangor, the region around the bay named after the warrior Panglima Garang, which is the heart of Mah Meri tribe, in order to deep dive into their culture.

Upon arrival, the students were greeted by a stunning entrance made entirely of traditional materials, welcoming them into the world of the Mah Meri people. Led by their knowledgeable guide, Diana Ross Binti Diaman, the students learned about the rich history and culture of the Mah Meri, also known as the "forest people," who live in harmony with nature. At the heart of their culture are intricate wood sculptures that represent ancestral spirits, created by skilled Mah Meri artists who draw inspiration from their animistic beliefs. The tour provided a deep understanding and visual appreciation of the Mah Meri way of life, with vibrant colours, lively sounds, and stunning artwork that have been well-preserved throughout the years.

As the students toured the Mah Meri neighbourhood, they were introduced to the traditional Jo'oh dance, a potent representation of Mah Meri culture and history. The dance involves a handcrafted mask made by Nyireh Batu together with the costume and is performed to welcome ancestral spirits, or muyang, to participate in the festivities. As dancers move in rhythm to the gong's rhythmic strokes, the joyous celebration of life and culture is a marvel to behold.

"The dance was a tradition for us during Hari Moyang and wedding occasions to show the purpose of welcoming the guest. But right now, in the modern days, we do the dance as a promotional basis for our Mah Meri culture or when people visit us, we do the dance as this is something that represents our identity, the Mah Meri," said Diaman Bin Kisah, the father of Diana Ross who is the masked dancer.

To delve deeper into the Jo'oh dance, Diaman invited the students to try on the costume and perform the dance together with him. The experience was unique and eye-opening as in the modern world we live in today, it is really hard to see a dance like this, not to mention experiencing it with the costume on. The Jo'oh mask was a masterpiece, with its sturdy yet heavy detailing that left a lasting impression. The meticulous craftsmanship from the initial outline to the finishing details is nothing short of stunning and jaw-dropping, showcasing the exceptional skill and mastery of Mah Meri wood carving skills.

The mystery and enchantment of their traditions are infused into these craftsmen's works, giving them life. Their finely detailed carvings are evidence of their devotion to protecting their cultural heritage and their desire to do so. Mah Meri carvers often draw inspiration from their animistic beliefs of spirits in nature. Every wood sculpture has its own backstory which comes from the artists and they use hardwood made from Nyireh Batu or Nyireh Bunga to craft the sculpture. Each time they cut down a tree to make a sculpture out of wood, they plant a new tree to maintain the natural balance of the village/ forest; a give-and-take concept. The village of the Mah Meri believes that spirits have played an important part in their way of life.

Some for example were used by the village to draw sickness out of the infirmed, and the sculptures were thrown away after the medicine ritual as they were believed to contain the sickness. This practice has added to their rarity. "These wood sculptures were a medium for us to transfer our sickness and pain. We believed these sculptures could bring our pain away, even something our human eye can't see. That is the origin of why we do sculpture carving," the woodcarver named Gali Adam in the Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Bumbun told us this and showed his beautifully crafted sculptures which comprised different kinds of spirits.

While on the journey of treasuring the beauty of the wood sculptures and the stories from Gali, one moment caught our attention, “now it is also very hard for us to sustain this, because of the lack of wood! Forests are no more, lands are taken by corporations for business purposes,” said Gali, speaking with disappointment and hopelessness in the expression of his eyes, but at the same time he conveyed that he hoped someone could help them in sustaining the forests.

This led to challenges that not only the Mah Meri faces, but the entire Orang Asli community in Peninsular Malaysia. Due to their close relationship with their forest, which serves as the source of their artistic inspiration for their wood carvings, musical compositions, pattern-based crafts – anyaman, and more, which should be appreciated and respected rather than simply as resources to be used.

The Mah Meri community particularly mentioned the lack of resources to create wood sculptures as the government only considers the forest as a source of raw materials and does not consider the forest as a source of cultural heritage. Placing the community in a difficult position to sustain their culture for future generations. The Orang Asli’s art, culture, and traditional dance are rarely appreciated in modern society, but sacrificing some aspects of their culture or lifestyle to integrate into the present may have a significant impact on both the community and biodiversity.

Before the Mah Meri Cultural Village journey ended, Diaman stated that he also faced the same issue as Gali stating, “In order for me to preserve and sustain the Jo’oh dance, is to be able to source the materials I need for the mask and the costume, but they are almost gone now. Those that I need like Nyirih Batu and leaves are nowhere to be found because I can’t find them in the forest anymore. So how do I continue making the mask and costume if I have no resources? It’s hard for us to continue if I’m being honest,“. Students found the same kind of expression with Gali, as shown by the reflection of his eyes and the way he told his challenges.

Many Orang Asli groups are frustrated and disappointed by the lack of opportunity and resources to present their art forms. Even though they work hard to protect their cultural legacy, they have trouble getting the support and attention their art forms require to survive. This makes the Orang Asli’s feel isolated and cut off from society as a whole, which heightens their feelings of loss and the need to protect their culture.

The visit to the Mah Meri Cultural Village left the students with thousands of emotions because of the challenges and difficulties they are facing right now. The younger generation’s lack of interest in understanding the customs that are essential to their culture is distressing to observe. This lack of attention, together with Malaysia’s growing modernisation, is causing the Orang Asli heritage’s distinctive and priceless elements to perish. The need to protect these facets of their culture is great because it affects not just their past but also their present and future.

With the sense of sustaining the Orang Asli Arts and Culture, 84 students from Year 2 Bachelor of Public Relations, TAR UMT collaborates with Epic Homes to organise the A.S.L.I. Campaign 2023, A Space Linking Identities aims to promote and assist the preservation of Orang Asli Arts & Culture and work towards the issues they are currently facing. The two-day campaign was held on 27th and 28th April 2023, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on the 1st Floor, Bangunan Tan Siew Sin, TAR UMT, KL Main Campus with a series of educational exhibitions and meaningful activities, also aims to raise funds for RM60,000 to build one complete home that situates a family of 5 by providing practical assistance for the Orang Asli communities through Epic Homes.

The difficulties in conserving the Orang Asli arts and culture are not simply intellectual or historical but also profoundly emotional and damage their feeling of identity and belonging. We need to take action to assist, and encourage the community, protect traditional knowledge, and give them the means and chances to exhibit their distinctive and priceless artistic forms. Failing to do so would be a great loss for all Malaysians who share in this rich and varied cultural legacy, not just the Orang Asli.

By joining us, A.S.L.I. Campaign 2023, you can help to provide assistance to sustain the arts and culture for the Orang Asli community, providing them with a platform to showcase their rich heritage to the public in conjunction to stand by their efforts. To donate, participate and or engage visit A.S.L.I. Campaign 2023 on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [their website](#) for more information.