

## TAR UMT Lecturer Becomes First Orang Asli Female to Receive Merdeka Award Grant



KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 25 — A lecturer from Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT) in Pahang has become the first Orang Asli female in the country to be conferred the Merdeka Award Grant for International Attachment. A member of the Jakun tribe, Masni Mat Dong was one of the five exceptional young Malaysians to receive the award from the Sultan of Perak and Royal Patron of the Merdeka Award Trust, Sultan Nazrin Shah at a ceremony here today. The 33-year-old was granted the award for her outstanding research proposal on “Reimagining Inclusive Development: A Spatial Justice and Multidimensional Poverty Perspective on the Orang Asli in Malaysia”, which aims to uplift the quality of Orang Asli lives in Malaysia.

“Due to our remote locations, the Orang Asli community faces numerous obstacles and challenges, such as the displacement of numerous communities and the loss of their cultural heritage. “With the grant given, I am looking to undergo my attachment at the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), University of Oxford, England, with the aim of studying the spatial injustice and multidimensional poverty of the Orang Asli,” she told reporters here today.

Hailing from Kampung Sungai Soi in Kuantan, Masni hopes that her achievement will encourage and empower Orang Asli to participate in decision-making processes through participatory and inclusive approaches that acknowledge its culture, history and values.

First introduced in 2012, the Merdeka Award Grant for International Attachment aims to nurture promising young Malaysians and support them in their journey of excellence by funding the recipients’ attachment to an institution or organisation of international repute in selected disciplines (education, arts, sports, community/social work, environment, health, science and technology).

To date, the total number of grant recipients has reached 29, who have secured their attachments at 30 institutions of higher learning across nine countries. Apart from Masni, other recipients for this year include a full-time PhD student Syaza Soraya Sauli; a research officer at the Danau Girang Field Centre (DGFC) in Sabah, Amaziasizamoria Jumail; an assistant professor at Xiamen University Malaysia Ng Chuck Chuan and a postdoctoral fellow at Nanyang Technological University Kong Xin Ying.

Meanwhile, for Amaziasizamoria, 33, who is currently working on the Regrow Borneo project in the Kinabatangan floodplain, she plans to undergo her attachment at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos (UAEM), Mexico, where she will be studying “Tropical Forest Restoration Ecology within a Global South Context.”

“In Sabah, the Kinabatangan floodplain is an important habitat for biodiversity and offers suitable opportunities for carbon sequestration. Unfortunately, 80 per cent of the forest has been converted for non-forest uses. This is why we established the Regrow Borneo project in Kinabatangan floodplain in 2019 to sequester carbon by replanting trees. “Such reforestation efforts are also essential towards improving the livelihood of local communities as well as enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem resilience. However, while many forest restoration efforts have been implemented in Malaysia, there has been no large-scale assessment of the impacts of forest restoration to date,” she said.

Therefore, with her attachment at UAEM, she aim to study suitable indicators for reforestation efforts such as forest structure, ecological functions and biodiversity as feasible methods to evaluate the outcome of effective forest restoration. “As Malaysia and Mexico are biodiversity hotspots facing comparable challenges in terms of deforestation, climate change, and socio-economic impacts, this attachment will enable me to work with a world-renowned research team and learn from an existing model that could be used as a guideline for the Bornean rainforest,” she added. — Bernama

