Chita' Hae

Culture, Crafts and Customs of the Hma' Meri in Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Pulau Carey

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2007
CENTER FOR ORANG ASLI CONCERNS
TOMPOQ TOPOH
SUBANG JAYA • MALAYSIA

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Published by
CENTER FOR ORANG ASLI CONCERNS
P.O. BOX 3052
47590 Subang Jaya, Malaysia
Email: coac@streamyx.com
website: www.coac.org.my

for
TOMPOQ TOPOH
Mah Meri Women's 'First Weave' Project
Kampung Orang Asli Sungei Bumbun
42690 Pulau Carey, Kuala Langat
Selangor, Malaysia

Printed by
Vinlin Press Sdn. Bhd.
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Layout & design
Colin/COAC

Photography
Colin Nicholas
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ISBN 978-983-43248-1-0

preface

This booklet came about when the Tompoq Topoh Mah Meri Women's 'First Weave' Project members saw the need to document their oral traditions and culture for themselves, and for future generations.

With increased exposure to various publications on the Hma' Meri, they came to realize that not all were accurate and that a disproportionate number of books focused on their woodcarvings.

The women felt that this was a lopsided approach as there was little mention of who they are as a people, how they live and what they believe in. They also wanted an opportunity to clarify or correct misconceptions present in certain publications.

With help from the Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC), Tompoq Topoh applied to and received funding from the Regional Network for Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia (RNIP) to document various aspects of their culture – which the women began in earnest in 2006.

This book is the result of interviews and discussions with village elders, members of the Tompoq Topoh group, their relatives and villagers of Kampung Sungai Bumbon. Where possible, their recorded narratives were then cross-referenced with available research, especially those by Wazir Jahan-Karim and Barbara S. Nowak, both of whom village elders concede were thorough with their fieldwork on Pulau Carey in the 1970s and 1980s.

Reita Rahim
March 2007

Chita' Hae, our stories

These are our stories, our memories and our knowledge which we would like to share with you.

This is the first opportunity we womenfolk had to publish what our *mengge'* (elders) had related to us. Previous publications (all by non-Aslians) are of varying degrees of accuracy, and few include facts we feel are important.

Many *chita muyang* (ancestor myths and legends) have already been forgotten as these were narrated orally, often as tales our parents told by lamplight. These *chita muyang* are as important to us as our *adat* (customary laws), as they define who we are and what we believe in.

Other stories and recollections regarding our past lifestyle and the hardships we had to endure have also been included lest our grandchildren forget how difficult life once was for our people on this island.

We have also included insights into our handicrafts, songs and dances which will hopefully flourish in the future – not just as a source of supplementary income but also as a way for our children to maintain their unique cultural identity.

We hope that this booklet will help both our grandchildren and our guests to better appreciate our rich heritage.

Maznah Unyan
Chairperson, Tompoq Topoh
March 2007

contents

pronunciation guide

The Besise' language is a Mon-Khmer, Austroasiatic language, specifically of the Southern Aslian subdivision. It sounds noticeably different from Bahasa Malaysia, the official Malay language spoken in Malaysia.

The Besise' language is spoken with stress on the last syllable of a word. Words often sound nasalized and many words utilize a glottal stop (') which sounds like a 'q', for example: Hma' is pronounced similar to 'maq'.

The spelling of Besise' words in this booklet does not utilise phonetical signs but relies on an approximate spelling as spoken in English.

Sounds that have been approximated are:

ae	as in 'hair'
ch	as in 'cheek'
e	as in 'herb'
r	nasalised

Sometimes spelled as Ma' Betiség or Hma' Btsisi', we are officially known as the Mah Meri (although the correct pronunciation is Hma' Meri). Of the 147,412 Orang Asli surveyed by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA) in 2003, we numbered only 2,896 or about 2 per cent of the total Orang Asli population.

Gendoi Samah Seman with some of her descendants.

Although our ancestors used to roam the coastal areas of southern Peninsula Malaysia, we have since settled in the state of Selangor. We now live along its southwest coast, within the districts of Kuala Langat and Klang, and on Pulau Carey.

Many of our younger generation are unaware of our origins or even our original name as the term 'Mah Meri' has been used by both researchers and the JHEOA to refer to us since the 1960s.

In our Besise' language '*hma"* refers to 'people' while '*meri*' means 'forest', thus it translates as

Pion Bumbong and Batin Sidin Bujang during ceremonies to honour the spirits.

'people of the forest'. In the past, this term was used by us when referring to *other* Orang Asli.

According to Gendoi Samah Seman, our Temuan neighbours on the mainland used to call us Hma' Besise' or literally, 'people with (fish) scales' – though she said that it also referred to our preference for living in coastal areas and our love of fishing.

Ibah Pion Bumbong adds that this was also because we spoke the Besise' language. He also relates this term to a *chita muyang* in which a fish scale lodged in the eye of a Besise' man nearly caused pandemonium when he mistook it for the distant sails of marauding pirates!

Today we have accepted use of the term 'Mah Meri' especially when conversing with visitors. It is too entrenched to discard. Yet among our own, we call ourselves *hma' hae* – 'our people'.

Although we are part of the larger Orang Asli community, we do not speak the same language. We use Bahasa Malaysia, which we learned in school, when conversing with other Orang Asli and Malaysians. However, our everyday spoken language is Besisi'. Some of us can also converse in rudimentary English.

Our island is now known as Pulau Carey, in reference to Jugraland and Carey Island Co. Ltd. – a Scottish-based company, which established the first coconut plantation here in 1895.

But this island wasn't always known as Pulau Carey. And according to many *mengge'*, it wasn't always an island, either.

Maznah Unyan showing one of the last remaining stands of *gunjeng* on the island.

Gendoi Samah explains that our island was once a *telo'* (bay) named Telo' Gunjeng – '*gunjeng*' being a type of wild but edible fern. Once abundant in the north of the island, *gunjeng* ferns are now rare; most of our people have never even seen or tasted one.

In her version of a popular *chita muyang*, Sungai Langat was once so narrow and shallow that one could easily stride across it, or by felling a small tree to use as a makeshift bridge.

Batin Sidin Bujang clarified that the narrowest point was located opposite of So' Gre' (now Bukit Jugra). He and Ibah Pion also confirmed that in the distant past Sungai Langat could only meander

So' Gre' as seen from Kamis Seman's fieldhouse near Sungai Piuk.

northwards towards Klang; there was no southern exit then.

Up until the recent past, our people had always relied on a network of small rivers on the island for travel between different villages and to nearby estuarine islands. They generally avoided circumnavigating the island via the open sea.

One of their routes to Port Klang from So' Gre' was via Sungai Kuang (now Sungai Keluang) which they named *Penaik Kuang*. The Kuang and Langat rivers weren't too far apart; at Simpang Empik (Three Junctions) they nearly converged.

Our ancestors cleared the mangrove roots and deepened the channel (*alor*) at this junction. Some *mengge'* attributed this to an order by Sultan Abdul Samad who wanted easier access to his palace at So' Gre'.

According to Gendoi Samah, our ancestors then 'cursed' the river junction so as to expand the new channel further. They cast the quicksilver coating (*ra'sa* or *gangsa*) from the back of a mirror into the shallows. The riverbanks began to erode and the channel deepened. Sungai Langat partially changed course – now one branch flows south and empties

directly into the sea. Thus Telo' Gunjeng ended up isolated as an estuarine island.

Many *mengge'* agree that there must be some truth to this *chita muyang* as both Neni' Kamis Seman and Ibah Pion could recall seeing traces of *Penaik Kuang*. Unfortunately this dried up riverbed is now overgrown with oil palm.

Prior to the building of a bridge in 1985, we had to use the private ferry service or small boat (*pahu'*) to cross Sungai Langat. Today, most visitors crossing the bridge don't even realize that they're entering an island!

before the plantations

3

Although none of our *mengge'* are old enough to remember life prior to the plantations, many can recall stories from their parents of how rich life was back then.

Prior to the 1900s, our ancestors lived in temporary settlements (*keled* or *meden*) along upper river estuaries on this island and on the mainland as they were dependent on both the sea and land for food, shelter and transport. They occasionally lived on their boats, settling in sheltered mangrove creeks for the night.

In Pulau Carey, our ancestors never stayed in large, permanent villages (*kampog*). They had to move when illness plagued the village, or when threatened by non-Aslian outsiders, pirates or slave raiders. They also migrated when hunting was

scarce, or when they needed to open new lands in what was then a heavily forested, uninhabited mangrove island.

There was very little freshwater on the island and they had to rely on rainwater and shallow wells. During droughts, our ancestors had to row across Sungai Langat to bring back freshwater from springs found on So' Gre'.

Langat River.

Even though life back then was hard and earning money extremely difficult, food was fairly abundant – if you knew where to look. There were birds (*chip*), deer (*rusa'*), wildboar (*ketu meri*) and other animals which they could hunt with various traps and blowpipes (*belau*). The mangrove forest (*bakau*) was so thick that they had to avoid encounters with the occasional elephant (*merhat*), tigers (*a-aa'*) and even forest spirits!

Our ancestors also had a bountiful sea (*bauwau*) that supplied them with various types of fishes (*ka*), while the surrounding mangoves (*bakau*) and mudflats (*linyau*) were rich with crabs (*ketab*), shellfish and other crustaceans.

There were enough trees for firewood, *nibung* palms (*mo'*) for housing, *nipah* for our thatch roofs and house walls, rattan, pandanus (*hake'*) and bamboo (*di'*) for crafts. Wild and cultivated fruits (*pelay*) were in relative abundance, and there were various wild vegetables (*tauu'*), too.

More importantly, there was enough land and resources for everyone.

According to Professors Wazir and Nowak, although our ancestors had always foraged on the island, they only began permanent settlement of Telo' Gunjeng in the mid-1800s. By the time the first plantations were opened in 1895, our ancestors had long settled in various parts of the island and considered these as our traditional lands. Their fruit trees were mature and they gave Besise' place-names to important rivers, capes and bays.

Much of the traditional lands of the Hma' Meri have passed to private hands.

At first there was only one coconut plantation – which displaced the entire village of Telo' Gunjeng. Soon, tea then rubber plantations appeared and more of our land was appropriated.

Our ancestors had to move. Again. At around the same time some of the mainland Hma' Meri also began migrating to Pulau Carey, and by the early 1950s we numbered almost a thousand strong.

According to Wazir, a 600-acre Aboriginal Reserve was established in 1952 encompassing the villages of Sungai Judah, Sungai Rambai and Kepau Laut. She also wrote that another 346 acres was surrendered by the previous plantation owners for the Sungai Bumbon Aboriginal Reserve in 1966 (though a land dispute in 2000 with the current plantation owners now puts this into question). An additional 160 acres was gazetted for the Sungai Kurau reserve. Thus our people were essentially confined to just over a thousand acres on a 35,000 acre island!

But even more worrisome developments were to come. More and more forest reserves were clear cut to convert into oil palm plantations while miles of earthen bunds were built to keep the sea out, dooming our mudflats, *bakau* and fishing grounds.

By the early 1990s our village of Sungai Bumbon became land-locked as even the stretch of *bakau* behind our village was reclaimed from the sea and turned into yet another oil palm estate, this time by a different plantation company.

Today there are only a handful of wild places on the entire island. Our rivers are hemmed in or choked off by bunds while many creeks are polluted with agriculture run-offs; our island's exposed coastline scarred from severe coastal erosion and the remaining *bakau* forests threatened.

Yet, we are neither against the plantations or development in principle, for it has given us many modern facilities and helped educate our children.

All we ask for is sustainable development that takes into account our current *and* future needs as an indigenous community. And for our lands to be secured as ours.

Kampong Sungai Bumbon

There are five main Hma' Meri villages on Pulau Carey: Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Kampung Sungai Judah, Kampung Sungai Kurau, Kampung Kepau Laut and Kampung Rambai.

Many of the traditional houses have been replaced with modern ones.

We are from Kampung Sungai Bumbon (pronounced "Bumbod"). In the Besise' language, *bumbod* refers to a hide used when trapping birds. Our linear village is named after Sungai Bumbon, one of several small rivers which flows through the village. The other rivers include Sungai Piuk, Sungai Salang and Sungai Mata.

Our present-day 320-acre village was once composed of three smaller riverine hamlets: Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Kampung Sungai Mata and Kampung Sungai Salang. Today we consider ourselves united in a single village although each hamlet still maintains its own *hadu' muyang* (ancestor spirit house).

The earliest hamlet, Kampung Sungai Salang, was established by Nihang Batin Limpaa, most likely

in the early 1930s. Then came Kampung Sungai Bumbon. According to Gendoi Rangun Seman, Kampung Sungai Mata - located between the two hamlets, was the last stretch of forest to be cleared and settled sometime after the Japanese Occupation (1941-1945).

The village now enjoys many modern amenities and facilities.

Batin Sidin Bujang, our headman, mentions that villagers of the different hamlets once kept to themselves but this slowly changed when inter-hamlet cooperation was needed in order to build our village school in the late 1950s.

In 1972, JOA built standardized wooden houses along the main village road – many of which are still inhabited today. Each family (*opoh*) have their own plots of inherited land, most of which are cultivated with cash crops.

Today (2007), there are almost 500 persons in our village, consisting of 83 families. Our village is governed by Batin Sidin and assisted by Semi Awas, his deputy (*Jenang*). Abdul Raman Kassim @ Aket, the *Jukrah,* mobilises villagers for village-level activities.

Today our village has many modern amenities including tarred road access, 24-hour water and electricity supply, a primary school, pre-school, multi-purpose hall cum clinic, and several handicraft workshops.

Although we live on an island, there are no fishermen in our village as we no longer have boats or direct access to the sea due to land reclamation works. However, many men still go line-fishing partly for leisure and partly for food.

Fortnightly harvests from their own oil palm small-holdings are the main source of income for most people here.

Most land-owning villagers rely on small-scale agriculture and cash crops for income. The older generation who own small plots of land have cultivated oil palm trees and/or coconut palms. We generally harvest the oil palm fruit bunches twice monthly, while coconuts are harvested periodically. These are sold to a *towkay* (middleman).

A few elders used to plant hill paddy (*be' so'*) but all have discontinued since 2005 as there's too little land left to cultivate and lie fallow. Heavy winds and pests have also led to the loss of paddy crops and

Enjoying fruits harvested from the garden near their house.

with it, all its accompanying rituals, beliefs and even handicrafts!

Thankfully we've managed to inherit various fruit trees which our grandparents or great-grandparents planted. Unfortunately what's harvested is often just enough for our own consumption. One of our favorite fruits is the thorny durian (*dian*).

Some of us also rear free-range chickens (*hayam*) to sell to the *towkay*. Many of us won't eat our chickens unless it is for a special occasion, as they're a good source of cash.

Today many of our children are land-less. Some help their parents work the family land. Others prefer to find wage work outside of the island or in nearby seafood restaurants or shops, while a few have gone further afield. With better education, they now stand a better chance of receiving a good salary.

Yet, there are some younger villagers who are quite content to remain within our village and earn a living from tourism and traditional handicrafts.

Many Hma' Meri in Pulau Carey still adhere to our customary laws (*adat*), taboos and animistic/ naturalistic beliefs although a small number have converted to Christianity or Islam.

We believe in *Muyan g* – a term which refers to our mythological ancestors as well as various plant and animal spirits that dwell in our Seven Layered World, a world akin to an onion of multiple yet enclosed layers.

Che' Yah Unyan at the *panga*.

Gomo' Che' Yah Unyan explains that humans live on *Ti' Enam* (the 'Sixth World') while our ancestors – both mythological and the good among the deceased – live in *Ti' Tujoh* (the Overworld). Below us are five layers of the Underworld, worlds filled with man-eating ghosts (*hantu*'), diseases and poisonous creatures.

Muyang are *orang alus* – supernatural transparent beings, casting no shadows. A long time

Spirit house at Sungai Mata.

ago, many plant and animal *Muyang* could take on human form, often causing spirit attacks (*tenong*). However our ancestors subdued them by using the *yed Muyang* curse to permanently transform them back into their respective plant or animal form.

The different *Muyang* can either help or hinder our daily lives. For example, *Muyang Gadeng* is the guardian and protector of the hamlet of Sungai Mata'. We give offerings while invoking blessings from our guardian *Muyang* at the spirit house during *Ari' Muyang* ('Ancestor's Day Celebration') and prior to any major celebrations.

We also believe in the ability of our deceased ancestors - which Gomo' Che Yah and Ibah Semi Awas refer to as *nihang* (for named deceased individuals) and *meleka-melikat* in general – to watch over or render help to us, their 'grandchildren' (*kenchu'-kenchit*). We sometimes invoke their aid in times of illness or crisis by setting up an outdoor family altar (*panga*) and placing offerings on it; *panga* must face the sunset, the direction of Death. Occasionally deceased ancestors may also request for specific offerings via our dreams.

Adat meminang (engagement) ceremony being officiated by the Batin and his *mengge' tengah*.

The Hma' Meri have customary laws (*adat*) governing our lives – civil laws encompassing marriage, prohibitions on incest and land use. *Adat* guides us on how we should live. According to some *mengge'*, our early *adat* was stolen from Muyang Melor who resides on the moon.

Adat is central to the Hma' Meri; Batin Sidin likens its absence to the absence of the Hma' Meri themselves. The *batin* is the main receptacle of *adat* in our community and governs our village with the *mengge' tengah* (council of village elders). The batin also solemnizes marriages and together with other village officials, helps to settle disputes, and oversees marriages and land claims. Rulings are based on the *adat* and usually made by consensus; monetary fines can be imposed for transgressions. In many cases, traditional riddles (*teken*) are used to solve disputes or even validate marriages.

Unfortunately many younger villagers are not adhering strictly to our *adat* these days. This situation worries Batin Sidin and some *mengge'* who fear its loss will lead not only to social problems but also a loss of identity.

Ari' Muyang

All Hma' Meri villages on Pulau Carey celebrate *Ari' Muyang* (Ancestor's Day Celebration or in Malay, Hari Moyang), though on different dates. The exact date is determined by each village 'shaman' based on the lunar cycle. *Ari' Muyang* is our biggest annual village-level celebration.

Small food offerings are presented to the *Muyang* prior to the start of the celebrations.

Due to our village history, Kampung Sungai Bumbon has three guardian spirits for each of our three riverine hamlets: *Muyang Keteg* (Sungai Bumbon), *Muyang Gadeng* (Sungai Mata) and *Muyang Amai* (Sungai Salang).

Most visitors to Kampung Sungai Bumbon are only familiar with the *hadu' Muyang* in Sungai Mata as it quite large and has a permanent communal eating hut (*penggan*). It is also where tourists converge annually during *Ari' Muyang*.

Semi Awas placing *bedak* paste onto the hands to symbolically wash away bad luck and to invite wealth.

Ari' Muyang celebrations in Kampung Sungai Bumbon occur exactly a calendar month after the Chinese New Year. A few days prior, villagers would repair and beautify the *hadu' muyang* with various *nipah* weavings (*anyam dawud*). At dusk the day before *Ari' Muyang*, the shaman informs the guardian *Muyang* that villagers would fete their *Muyang* the next morning.

The night before *Ari' Muyang* sees all households preparing their respective *panga*, also decorated with *nipah* weavings and fresh flowers. Each family member then offers a minimum of *chamai* (betel leaves), areca nuts and tobacco to individual deceased ancestors. Various food and drinks are also included – all smoked over incense (*mian*) so it becomes 'visible' to our ancestors. We then pray for the good health of our family.

Early the next morning, our 'shaman' revisits the *hadu' Muyang* with small offerings (usually numbering seven) of traditional items like *chamai* (betel leaves) and food items including *topat muyang*. He then proceeds to pray for the good health of the

Food, music and dance come after the riutals.

villagers. Fellow villagers then come by with additional offerings from each household.

All are then blessed on both sides of their palms and forehead with *bedak*, a fragrant rice-flour and leaf mixture. Ibah Semi (the 'shaman' who takes care of *Muyang Gadeng*) says that this symbolically washes away one's bad luck and invites wealth. It also identifies and makes us visible to the *Muyang*.

In Sungai Mata, our Tompoq Tompoh troupe will then proceed to entertain *Muyang Gadeng* (and all those present) with the *mayin jo-oh*. Villagers, guests and tourists then gather at the *penggan* to join in a potluck feast hosted by the villagers.

The festivities usually ends by noon. According to Ibah Semi, this is because the world of the *Muyang* is the opposite of ours; noon is equivalent to midnight and small offerings are huge!

All villagers must then observe a mandatory three-day holiday where any type of wage work is prohibited.

Mayin jo-oh is our traditional mask dance in which we invite the *Muyang* to join us in celebration; it is not a ritualistic dance and involves no trances. We perform the *jo-oh* during *Ari' Muyang*, for weddings and other joyous occasions.

Dancing around the *busot*.

According to Nihang Unyan Awas, *mayin jo-oh* originated from Koy (now called Tanjung Sepat) and the male dancers previously wore simple paper masks.

Many elders agree that Nihang Ahmad Kassim (or more correctly, Ahmad Muntil) was a staunch supporter of Hma' Besise' culture and it was he who actively encouraged villagers to dance, sing and carve. He was also the first to fashion an articulated wooden mask specifically for the *jo-oh*, sometime in the late 1950s.

Many older villagers, including Gendoi Che' Embong

@ Mekan, can still recall the late night *jo-oh* sessions at Nihang Ahmad's *balai* (hall) near Sungai Salang. This simple, purpose-built hall even had a man-made *busot* (earthern mound) for us to dance around. And we danced the *jo-oh* almost every night!

According to Wazir, *mayin jo-oh* was originally performed in a series of seven consecutive song cycles. However, Gomo' Maznah Unyan says this is no longer practiced. She also mentions that the lyrics of the *jo-oh* songs have been continuously modified by different *jo-oh* singers throughout the years.

During the *mayin jo-oh*, women wearing *nipah* leaf ornaments would dance counter-clockwise around a *busot*. Once made from compacted earth, it has since been replaced with a tapered bamboo frame decorated with woven *nipah* leaves. The *busot* represents a *so'* (mountain) narrated in our *chita Muyang* in which two Hma' Meri siblings who survived the Great Flood circumnavigated the *so'* for seven years before realizing that they were the last two humans on Earth. The couple then re-populated the earth.

A young man wearing a mask and simple *nipah* ornaments would dance rather ungainly compared to the ordered steps of the women. The masked dancer also moves counter-clockwise, usually on the periphery of the other dancers. All dancers move counter-clockwise to acknowledge the prohibition on incest as laid down in our *adat*.

Several musical instruments accompany the *jo-oh.* These are the *tuntog* (two sets of bamboo stampers), *jule* (viola), *tambo* (double-headed drum) and a *tawa'* (brass gong). A singer would sing different songs including *Lagu' Tok Nanin*' (Song of Tok Naning, the ancestor) or *Lagu' Gemah Lebat* (Song of the Rainstorm).

According to Nowak, our mask dance is unique as it is the only one practiced by an indigenous community in Malaysia. These days, Hma' Meri *mayin jo-oh* troupes are often invited to tourism-related events all over Malaysia.

Tompoq Topoh troupe members now prefer to wear elaborate traditional costumes of barkcloth (*teghap*) and *nipah* including *songkho'* (plaited headbands), *selipang* (sashes) and *dendan* (skirts) when performing for guests. We feel it is a good way for the public to know and appreciate our unique heritage.

We also love to invite guests to join us when we dance the *jo-oh* so they can better understand and enjoy our culture.

Hma' Meri womenfolk didn't always make handicrafts for a living; handicrafts were only for personal, everyday use. Most women in our village are not well-educated, preferring to stay home and look after their families. Only the younger, better educated women have managed to secure jobs on the mainland.

The Tompoq Topoh initiative is about empowering Hma' Meri women.

However, we women have always managed to supplement our family's income by doing odd jobs between household chores. These include making stick brooms (*sapu lidi*') from discarded oil palm fronds or by husking coconuts. Those of us whose husbands are woodcarvers would help them to sand, wax and polish their finished sculptures.

By 2000, there was a revival of interest in Hma' Meri woodcarving, but the opposite happened to pandanus weaving (*anyam hake*'). The loss of

pandanus (*hake'*) clumps due to land clearance led to the loss of raw material and eventually, interest in *anyam hake'*.

Alarmed by the decline in *anyam hake'*, Gendoi Samah and her family began to weave, first for documentative purposes and later, for sale. In 2003 her daughter, Gomo' Maznah Unyan, gathered their extended family and friends to revive the weaving of *bujam* (betel pouches), mats and baskets.

Aided by several individuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (MHDC), we women managed to improve on our processing, weaving and dyeing skills.

In 2005 we named ourselves Tompoq Topoh – '*tompoq'* translates as 'the start of a weave' while '*topoh*' is an interlocking mat pattern. Thus "Tompoq Topoh" translates as 'the start of collaborative effort'. We now have 17 members, all women. Most are active weavers who also belong to our *mayin jo-oh* troupe. Membership is open to any Hma' Meri interested in their culture.

With grants from RNIP and the Ford Motor Company, our members have replanted almost a thousand pandanus seedlings and other plants needed for future handicraft production. More importantly, the grant from RNIP also helped us to purchase audio-video and computer equipment which we have used to document our own heritage. This publication is a product of this initiative.

Tompoq Topoh members have also been fortunate enough to attend several indigenous peoples' conferences and related workshops in other Southeast Asian countries. We have also reached out to other indigenous communities who need help with pandanus weaving or replanting.

anyam dawud & anyam hake'

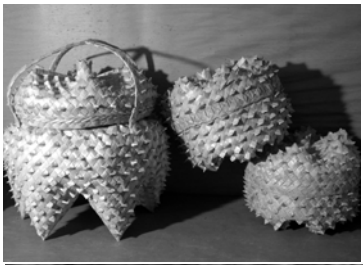
11

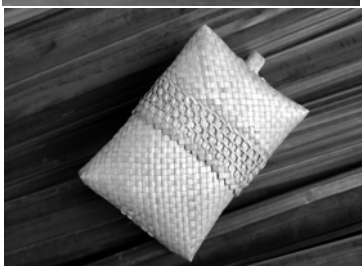
Anyaman (weaving) is considered women's art and it was once a necessary skill for a bride-to-be as she had to weave several mats for her own wedding. Today, we weave various mats, pouches and baskets from four species of pandanus (*hake'*) which can still be found on the island. Two other large wild pandanus species are locally extinct as are the natural dyes we once used, laments Gendoi Samah.

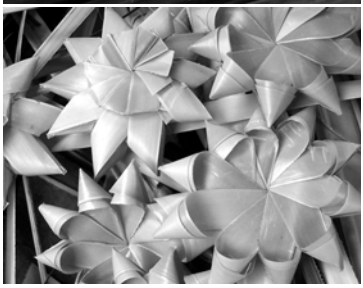
Pandanus leaves being heated over embers prior to further processing into strips for weaving.

Hake' has to be processed prior to weaving. The long leaves are carefully harvested, wilted over embers, dethorned (if any) and cut into uniform strips using the *jangka'*, a comb-like knife. The strips have to be smoothened and tied into bundles before being soaked for two days in a water-flour mixture in order to remove its sugar and chlorophyll content. The strips are then rinsed and sun-bleached to a beautiful beige. The dried strips are then smoothened again before being dyed in a chemical dyebath.

Processed *hake'* strips can be woven into fine *bujam* pouches, which we have modified to become purses, mobile phone pouches and namecard holders. These usually take up to three days to weave. Larger-width strips can be woven into mats, or baskets like the thorny *dudo' duri*. Mats can take several weeks to weave.







Another form of weaving is *anyam dawud* in which *nipah* leaflets are woven as decorations for spirit houses, altars, homes and even *jo-oh* dancers. These are similar to leaf-weavings of other Orang Asli and indigenous peoples in many parts of the world. Occasionally mistaken as similar to Japanese origami (which is the craft of folding paper), *anyam dawud* however relies on a combination of weaving and plaiting strips of *nipah* leaflets.

Nipah is easier to weave compared to *hake'* as it requires almost no processing, but it is very difficult to extract from the *nipah* groves which only thrive in muddy river estuaries. As there are no *nipah* groves within our village, we have to travel via motorcycle to Sungai Kuang and beyond for our supplies. In order to get a bi-coloured effect, we harvest both young and mature fronds and interweave them (however both fade to a dull beige when dry).

Apart from decorating the *panga* and other spaces, the *anyam dawub* is also used in dress.

According to Gomo' Che' Yah Unyan and Maznah Unyan, the plants and animals that we weave in *nipah* feature in our *chita muyang* or came to us in our dreams (these include *bunga' gombe* and *subang*). Occasionally we'll create new designs (*bunga' tepus*) or modify existing ones (*jering lidah* and *keris pintal*). Common ornaments include flowers (*bunga' bintang* and *jering*), birds, fishes, prawns (*hudag*) and horseshoe crabs (*angkhaes*). There are also special ornaments like the *tombak muyang* (ancestor's spear) and 'spirit flowers' (*subang*, *bengkal, aetiau, bunga' serai* and *bunga' taman*) which are only woven for ritual occasions.

Both forms of weaving are sustainable crafts as we only harvest what is necessary. We have also replanted *hake'* seedlings to ensure a continuous supply as demand for our pandanus products increase. We are however concerned that future supplies of *nipah* may be threatened by the high demand for *anyam dawud* items for tourists and the continued clearing of remaining *nipah* groves along our rivers.

topeng & patong

12

Woodcarving is only practised by menfolk in Kampung Sungai Bumbon; no other Hma' Meri village on this island or on the mainland carves *topeng* (masks) or *patong* (sculptures).

Ceremonial face masks feature in the *mayin jo-oh* mask dance. According to Ibah Pion (who has been awarded the status of *Adiguru Kraf* or Master Craftsman by the government), the best masks were made from lightweight but durable *tengkho* roots (*Alstonia* sp.) while less hardy ones were carved from its trunk.

The *topeng* we use in *jo-oh* dances today are often embellished with paint, have plaited *nipah* or barkcloth 'hair' while some have goat hair eyebrows or moustaches. As *tengkho* wood is now very rare on the island, most *topeng* are now carved from *nyireh batu* (*Xylocarpus moluccensis*) – but these are far too heavy to use.

Although our men have always carved the *topeng* (previously in miniature for ritual use), large wooden sculptures and masks only date back to the late 1950s. In the past we occasionally carved small


Senior craftsmen Kamis Seman (left) and Ahmad Aken acknowledge that it was Hoessein Enas who encouraged them and others to develop their wood carvings and sculptures as an art form with commercial potential.

figurines from *angkhap* (*Zalacca wallichiana*), a lightweight palm wood. These functioned as *tukar gantik* – effigies which help transfer, contain and cast out illnesses when placed in an *anchak* ritual basket.

Neni' Kamis, Ibah Pion and Ibah Ahmad Aken all confirmed that it was the late artist Hoessein Enas, then Assistant Protector of Aborigines in Selangor, that actively encouraged Nihang Ahmad Kassim, Nihang Singan Muntil and Nihang Ligam Top to carve large sculptures.

All acknowledged that it was Hoessein who recognized and helped to develop their artistic talents.

Nihang Ahmad Kassim carved the earliest non-ritualistic *patong* from rambutan wood. According to Ibah Ahmad Aken, this was a foot-long sculpture of a woman holding a crab. He regrets that this piece was stolen in Kuala Lumpur.

Nihang Ahmad then switched to using the reddish heartwood of the *nyireh batu,* a mangrove tree which was fairly abundant then. This hardwood was much more difficult to carve but had a beautiful dark red hue and fine grain.

By the 1960s Ibah Pion recalled that there was an informal competition between carvers to see who could best interpret the various *chita muyang* in three-dimensions. Each carver was then accorded 'rights' over their popular designs.

Later, our masks and sculptures gained popularity especially after Hoessein and the JOA (Department of Aborigines) exhibited our woodcarvings all the way in Kuala Lumpur.

Some of us were also fortunate to be invited to demonstrate our carving skills in Kuala Lumpur and beyond – a tradition which continues until today.

Pion Bumbong with a sketch done by Nihang Ahmad Kassim of the latter's father, Muntil. The influence of Hoessein Enas is evident here.

Today there are 30 wood-carvers working in several backyard workshops scattered throughout our village.

Unlike the ritualistic masks and figurines which are housed in our *hadu' muyang*, contemporary woodcarvings serve no ritual function. They are merely a way for us to continue our traditions while earning a supplementary income.

glossary

The following are the meanings of terms as used in Kampung Sungai Bumbon and as informed by the village elders. They may differ from the meanings normally ascribed to such terms by other Aslian or Malay speakers.

Adat	Customary Hma' Meri laws encompassing marriage, civil behavior and land rights. *Adat* is upheld by the Batin and the village council (*Mengge' Tengah*).
anyam dawud	Ornamental leaf weavings made from *nipah* leaflets, used to define and decorate ritual spaces, and *jo-oh* dancers.
anyam hake'	Weavings utilizing processed pandanus strips.
Aslian	Member of any of the 19 Orang Asli ethnic groups.
Ari' Muyang	Ancestor Day Celebration. A grand annual celebration where offerings are made to the guardian spirit of a hamlet in order to maintain the good health of all its inhabitants. The date is different for each village and is set according to the lunar calendar.
bakau	Mangrove forest.
balai	Community hall.
be' so'	Hill padi.
Batin	Village headman and keeper of *Adat*. A hereditary post.
Besise'	Language spoken by the Hma' Meri; varies slightly between versions spoken on the mainland and on Pulau Carey.
bujam	Betel pouches woven from pandanus.
busot	Earthen termite mound. In *mayin jo-oh* this represents a mountain (*so'*); a decorated bamboo frame now replaces man-made compacted earth mounds.
chamai	Betel leaf
chita Muyang	Ancestor stories. Besise' myths and legends describing different *Muyang*; includes creation myths.
dendan	Skirts made from *nipah* frond strips. Also refers to ornamental streamers used to decorate ritual spaces.
Gendoi	Grandmother.

Gomo'	Aunt.
hadu' Muyang	Or, *du' Muyang*. Ancestor spirit house found in each hamlet. Some house representative sculptures of the respective guardian spirit.
hake'	*Pandanus* sp.; its processed strips are used for weaving.
hayam	Chickens, poultry.
Hma' Besise'	The term used by the Temuan Asli to refer to us as a people.
Hma' Meri	Revised Besise' spelling for the official term 'Mah Meri'.
Ibah	Uncle.
jangka'	Comb-like knife used for stripping pandanus.
Jenang	Deputy village-chief / keeper of the *Adat*.
jo-oh	Abbreviation of *mayin jo-oh*.
Jukrah	Village mandor or works minister.
jule	Viola.
JOA	Jabatan Orang Asli (Department of Aborigines), later renamed JHEOA.
JHEOA	Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Affairs). Previously known as JOA.
kampung	Malay: village. Besise': *kampog*.
keled	Temporary settlement. Also known as *meden*.
kenchu-kenchit	'Grandchildren' (what we are referred to by the *Muyang*).
Mah Meri	The official JHEOA designation for the Hma' Meri.
mayin jo-oh	Traditional celebratory circular dance around a *busot*, with one or more masked male dancers.
melika-melikat	Our ancestors whose names have been lost or forgotten.
mengge'	Respected elders.
Mengge' Tengah	Council of Village Elders
Muyang	Ancestor spirits. A general term which refers to mythical ancestors of the Hma' Meri, or spirits of plants and animals.
Neni'	Grandfather.
Nihang	Honorific term used when referring to a deceased person.
nipah	A large mangrove palm, *Nipah fructicans,* used in thatching and in ornamental leaf weaving (*anyam dawud*).

nyireh batu	An increasingly rare mangrove tree, *Xylocarpus moluccensis*. Only the reddish heartwood can be used.
Orang Asli	The indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia.
opoh	Family.
panga	A home-based, outdoor altar for deceased ancestors.
penggan	Communal eating hut.
patong	Wooden sculptures. Formerly carved for rituals including the *tukar gantik* healing ritual or housed in a *hadu' Muyang*. Contemporary ones are purely decorative.
selipang	Sash plaited from *nipah*.
So'	Hill.
So' Gre	Besise' for Bukit Jugra (Jugra Hill). Also called So' Jugre'.
songkho'	Plaited headbands made from *nipah*.
sungai	Malay: river. Besise': dugende'. Abbreviated as 'Sg.'
tambo	Double-headed drum.
tawa'	Brass gong.
teghap	Barkcloth (made from the inner bark of the *tekhoh teghap* (*Artocarpus sp*.) tree.
teken	Traditional riddle.
Telo' Gunjeng	Besise' placename for Pulau Carey (Carey Island).
tenong	Spirit attacks.
Ti' Enam	The Sixth World (Earth, the world we currently inhabit).
Ti' Tujoh	The Seventh World (Overworld)
tompoq	The start of a weave.
topat	Malay: Ketupat. Rice cooked in a woven coconut leaf casing.
topeng	Wooden masks. Functional masks covering the entire face were carved from lightweight *pulai* wood (*Alstonia sp*.) while decorative versions are made from *nyireh batu (Xylocarpus sp*.)
topoh	An interlocking mat pattern.
tuntog	A pair of bamboo stampers used as a musical instrument.
towkay	(Chinese) middleman.
yed	Plants.

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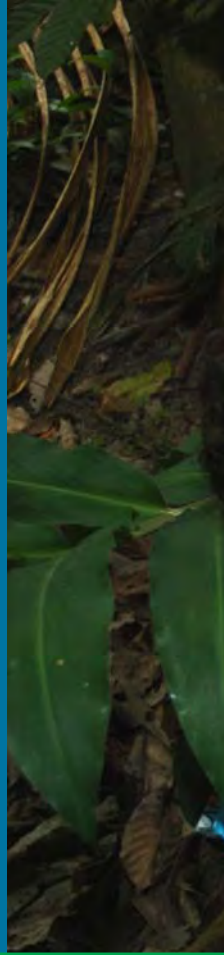
CHITA' HAE

Culture, Crafts and Customs of the Hma' Meri in Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Pulau Carey



The Hma' Meri of Carey Island have long been a source of interest to anthropologists and tourists alike. Living on an estuarine island at the mouth of the Langat River in Selangor – barely an hour's drive from Kuala Lumpur – the villagers of Kampung Sungai Bumbon are accustomed to visits by students, researchers and tourists who are attracted by their indigenous culture and handicrafts.

As the number of visitors steadily increased over the years (notably after a bridge was built in 1985 and a sealed access road constructed in the 1990s), some villagers began to see the need to help visitors better understand their culture. In the past, the scarcity of villagers conversant in English led to tour guides frequently misinterpreting or mis-communicating their culture or beliefs. Later, they also discovered that some publications on the Hma' Meri were inaccurate or misinformed.

In 2006, members of the Tompoq Topoh Mah Meri Women's 'First Weave' Project had the opportunity to not only document their oral history but to publish this booklet in which they narrate about their past, the physical changes to their island home and about their beliefs.

TOMPOQ TOPOH
MAH MERI WOMEN'S 'FIRST WEAVE' PROJECT

CENTER FOR ORANG ASLI CONCERNS

ISBN 978-983-43248-1-0

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