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The Mahmeri Sculpture Heritage In Malaysia: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract. The indigenous people in Malaysia comprises of three main ethnics groups whom are Semang-Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Melayu. The indigenous people are minority in Malaysia, while Mahmeri

is one of the tribesmen of main ethnics group of Senoi. This tribesman could only be found in Selangor and

they are famous as statue and mask sculptor. There are a total of 640 characters of mask wood from the creative work of Mahmeri tribesman in Carey Island which is based on a story of the suffering of their ancestors tulah whom had violated the customs and social ethic and behaviour, human and nature relationship. This study is to investigate the sculpture value and significant on Mahmeri today. This is instigating by the changes of their thinking, beliefs and customs due to the effect of modernization and globalization.

Keywords: mahmeri, mask, sculpture, ethnic, minority

1. Introduction

According to Sidi Gazalba [1], religion has a strong link to the development of arts. Based on the previous

great civilizations, it can be observed that their arts was created for worshipping God or other powers which

they believed could protect them. In fact, the same development is happening to the Mahmeri's arts.

To study the changes that took place in the Mahmeri community, the aspects need to be addressed are

modernization and globalization. According to the relative definition, modernization is an effort intended to

level up to the standard which is perceived as modern by people and also government.

Modernity is related

to the excellence of innovation or the improvement of awareness, moral, ethic, technology and social in

development of humankind. One of the changes was prompted by urbanization. Urbanization is a process

whereby a large number of populations moved out from rural and town area and stays in a city or surround

cities areas

Sociologists have different views pertaining to this urbanization effect. Some looked from the positive

aspects and argue that city is the highest civilization for human. City is a meeting place of various races, a

place to exchange ideas and expanding views, a place to encourage innovation in businesses, science and

technology and arts. Some of sociologists see city as a place of destruction such as pollution, life pressure,

crime and the most importantly destroy values to be shared in human community [2]. This survey would explore the effect of modernization and urbanization to the community of Mahmeri from both aspects, positive and negative towards their statue and mask sculpture. The change of arts' value and philosophy is believed have taken place and definitely the community had their own view points. If it is viewed from the perspective of human civilization history, the fine arts started when human start feel the needs to have something in having a comfortable lives especially in solving their current problems. They were motivated to invent or produce something using whatever they have in their surroundings to fulfil the needs. Most probably, the origin of arts in Mahmeri community was instigating from the same reason. In the other way, study in the aspect of sculpture is not far from studying and understand in depth the universal views, beliefs, religion and spiritual practices of Mahmeri community. These elements are underlying the aspects.

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The Indigenous people comprises of three main groups which are Semang-Negrato, Senoi and Malay-Proto. The Mahmeri is one of the tribesmen of main groups which Senoi. Beside Mahmeri, there are other tribesmen from the same group which are Che' Wong, Jahut, Semai, Semoq Beri and Temiar. The Mahmeri is also known as Besisi. This name is used by few researchers in their studies such as Narifumi Maeda

Tachimoto [3] and Marina Roseman [4].

However, currently most of the researchers used the name Mahmeri frequently. Mahmeri means Jungle

People (Mah - people and Meri - jungle), while Besisi is based on the language used which is called Sisi [5].

Most of Mahmeri is residing in Carey Island, Selangor. According to the Department of Indigenous, the population of Mahmeri in year 1965 was 1,212 and in the year 1993, the population of is around 2,185 [6].

This tribesman can only be found in Selangor and they are well-known as statue and mask sculptor.

There are 640 characters of mask wood creative works of Mahmeri in Carey Island which were based on the stories of suffering due to the violation of customs and social ethics and behaviour and human and nature

relationship by their tula ancestors. From these 640 masks, a total of 108 masks are in the collection of

Asian Arts Muzium, University of Malaya.

As mentioned by Tay Pek San [7], the traditional arts of indigenous is not describing the artistic value,

music or literature aspiration in their community but is closely related to their beliefs and a necessary part of their spiritual aspects. Most of their arts are sacred and is passed from one generation to another. It is their identity. Therefore, it is obvious that the origin of the arts in the indigenous community is decided by the interest of their religion and beliefs.

The objectives of this study are:

- To study the function and the importance of values in the production of Mahmeri statue and masks in their lives.
- The event of changes towards the need of the sculptures such as the effect of modernization and globalization among Mahmeri and finding other factors which cause this art to be fast disappearing.
- To study the position of statue and masks sculptures from the perspective of beliefs and others aspects pertaining to statue and masks in Mahmeri community today.

2. Background to the Study

There are few studies done on Mahmeri but the numbers are considered very small compared to the

studies done on Semai, Temiar and Jahut. Indeed the sculpture studies by most researchers were focussed on

statue sculpture by Jahut. However, the effort done by few researchers on Mahmeri has not addressed

profoundly on their sculptures. For example, Iskandar Carey [8] and later Roland Werner [5] have done

studies on Mahmeri in Carey Island. His study focus on the relationship of Spirit (Ancestor) and lives of

Mahmeri which is exist in almost all of their important events such as birth, wedding, death and Annual

Worshipping Spirit Celebration. One important aspect in his study which could be regarded relevant to this

study is about myths stories of Mahmeri sculptures. However, he didn't observe the function and the

importance of wood sculptures to Mahmeri from the perspective of civilization.

Meanwhile there is another study which views the other aspect which is Mahmeri's quatrain by Shaiful Bahri Md. Radzi [6]. He didn't deny the fact of the extinction of quatrains tradition among Mahmeri

youth. At least this would give an early description of the same phenomena might happen to their sculptures.

Therefore, this study would observe the position and the significant of this sculpture from the perspective of

civilization beside its functions to Mahmeri community today. This is caused by the changes in their thinking,

beliefs and culture as the effect of modernization and globalization. Definitely these changes would give an

impact on their sculptures. The findings from previous studies might not give an actual description of

Mahmeri lives today. These information is needed to observe the changes in Mahmeri particularly and indigenous generally.

3. Methodology

This study is done by adopting qualitative approach. Interview has been done on sculptors and elders from Mahmeri community because of their in-depth understandings of their beliefs, real functions, myths and taboos. Besides, the interview was also done on youth to observe their different and changes of universal views and behaviour towards their traditional sculptures. Direct observation was also done to examine their way of lives and mask sculpturing and observe the changes of technology in their sculptures.

4. Findings

Reseracher has visited Carey Island which is located in Kuala Langat district, Selangor, Malaysia on three occasions dated 25 April 2009, 10 May 2009 and 7 Jun 2009. The followings are the reports of the interviews and observation done by researcher in the series of visits for this study. Researcher had interviewed an elder sculptor, Pion Bumbun, who is more than 70 years old. He was not feeling well but still has a strong memory of the mask sculpture and its stories. He still keeps few masks and wood sculptures. He shared a lot of stories regarding the origin of Mahmeri community. According to him, the Mahmeri name is totally not related to their beliefs and origin. His community should be called Betisse, based on the folklore of his collections. They believed that they were from southern Malaysia, moved away because of the pirate attacks and eventually they stay where they are today. Pion shared a lot of stories of the masks creating and sculpturing. He could convey the origin of stories clearly and relating how the masks being sculptured and given names. The entire mask sculptured and studied based on the interview with Pion shown the element of curse, the consequences of violated the taboo and posses the ethic values to the community who still have a faith in it. It can be regarded as social control of local community behavior to respect elderly, not to be violent, not to suppress, be prudent, respect others, be responsible, help each other, be tolerant, not to do vain activities, not be overzealous and so on. Early conclusion based on the information on the effect of the mask's stories from Pion is the value systems and its norms. For example, respect elderly is an important value, especially in maintaining a harmonious relationship in the community. Besides being controlled by the *tulah* concept, respect elderly is regarded as an obligation to be fulfilled by younger generation. Meanwhile, the sharing practice in *punan*

concept has taught Mahmeri people to share equally all life resources such as land, jungle, hunts stock, products, and responsibilities and so on in their community. Therefore, there is a mask sculpted to teach member of the community to behave in line with good values. In other words, most of the masks were sculptured earlier not only for the purpose of medication ceremony, but also as a non-formal education to its people so that they won't repeat the same mistake done by earlier generations. Stories and characters in each mask are different from one to another. And has its own uniqueness. Mask is regarded as an ancestor which is not mean to insult or downgrade their ancestors' privilege, on the other hand, it highlight that the strong curse would be spell out if level of culture is violated. Based on the book written by Roland Werner, Anthony Ratos and Johanna Ng, Pion is the sculptor of most of the mask and arcs listed in the books. Therefore, it is not surprised when Pion could share and explain thoroughly the stories about sculptures and functions of the masks. Research also found that Pion's small hut to produce his sculpture'craft is not active. To produce sculpture, energy is very much needed, the energy to find wood ad skill stories to sculptur. Pion also mentioned that he is not active and strong anymore to do sculpture because of age and health factors. Besides, Pion also expresses his sadness when he discovered that the youngersters are not interested to continue their ancestors' tradition. If there are, according to him, function and purpose of sculpting masks and statue is far from than real purpose. The researcher also interviewed Iyah Uyun or known as Yah. She lives in a house shared by other four members. Based on the observation, she stayed with her children, some of whom are still unmarried. The total household is about 15 people. She is single mother. Now she is involved in the women association which tries to introduce Mahmeri handcraft and at the same time try to earn money by effort to sell the craft. Yah lives in the island since she was small. During the interview, she could still recall the various taboos, craft and her people' beliefs. Indeed she could explain in detail the development of the people and Carey Island. This is because of her mother, Gendoi who are a midwife in the village, has skill to play music and sings Mahmeri's variety of quatrain and poems. Together with Yah is her son who supports their livelihood after her husband's death. Her son, Razali is focusing on arc and mask sculpturing. Razali is categorized as young sculptor and has a lot of encouragements and guidance form Pion. Based on the close observation by researcher and his admission, he is not well-versed of the stories of their

ancestors or masks produced. He sculpts based on the request of individual and tourists. His understanding of sculptress stories and taboo is referred to his mother and Pion.

Another informant who showed her mask work is Yah's daughter, Zainab who stays together with her.

While in workshop, working on mask and wood sculpture, she showed 10 different wood masks showing

different small faces of her ancestors. The small mask was an order by Dr. Collin Nicholas, a researcher of

the Indigenous from COAC (*Centre for Orang Asli Concern*). He comments that mini masks made from

stone nyirih wood, need to be waxed and rubbed with gasoline to look shiny. During the visit, he showed the

method to shine using wax and kerosene and drying the masks under the sun.

Zainab states that besides the request from clients, mask or moyang are divided into two shapes

whereby the one resembling the human face would be used for dancing while the smaller one is used for the

purpose of "ancak" show which is the ceremony to heal disease. "Ancak" ceremony is the ceremony to drift

witchcraft medicine tools included a mask.

Another interviewed informant was Gendoi who is 80 plus years old. Gendoi was regarded as someone

who has a lot of knowledge pertaining to customs, taboo, proverbs and mask crafting. However, because of

age factor, most of the information gathered was difficult to understand. At this moment, Gendoi is depending

on sale of craft, which is sold in form of pandan weaved and other tools used.

Based on the research and early observation, it is found that the real sculptures activities according to the

old Mahmeri belief heritage was not practiced anymore. This is because old generation sculptors are slowly

fading away and the existence of new generation who are only interested in sculpture for commercial

purpose. It is also found that the quality of most of the masks and statues produced are not comparable to

what it used to be. From the view of style and sculpture, it was observed that it is now being produced by

machine instead of skilled craftsmanship.

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