

## THE AESTHETIC OF ORANG ASLI (INDIGENOUS PEOPLE) SCULPTURE OF PENINSULA MALAYSIA

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### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to analyse the aesthetic elements of the primitive people of Malaysia. There were several groups of indigenous people of Peninsula Malaysia made of 0.1% of the whole population based on the 1999 survey. There were comprised of thirteen groups of these indigenous people live in several part of Malaysia but among them only two group of the Indigenous people produce artwork that is MahMeri and JahHut. The MahMeris and Jah Hut came from same community but they live separated to each other. The MahMeris live along the shore of the peninsula whilst the Jah Hut lives in the interior of the mainland jungle. Due to the different location the produce different sculpture that need the academic analysis in order to understand the importance to the community and the contemporary art work on the whole. The two indigenous communities produce artwork such as mask and sculpture out of wood. The aim of my paper is to investigate the importance of the wood sculpture to these communities as part of their economic, social and religious endeavour.

The research methodology based qualitative approached. The researcher used observation of the wood carvers, their workplaces, studios, and researcher also conduct several interview over the period of four years with the local respondent and also analyses the art works based on the Erwin Panofsky and Sigmund Freud Psychoanalysis theory. Several samples of the work have been used for the purpose of examined its variable with the culture and spiritual world-view of the indigenous people of MahMeri and Jah Hut.

Several break through has been discovered in the final conclusion of the research finding are the art work especially masks had the influences of foreign ethnic mask and sculpture especially region around Asean countries. Some of the carver has diversified their discipline which include wood print, modern sculptures, commercial product which was alien to their predecessor. In order to enhance their economy through the arts the communities set up the cooperative centre to distribute and market their art and craft especially mask and sculpture which is in high demand.

The research methodology based qualitative method. The researchers visit to the location, observation of the wood carver's studio, conduct interview with the local respondent and also analyses the art work. Several samples of the work have been used for the purpose of examined its variable with the culture and spiritual worldview of the indigenous people of MahMeri and Jah Hut.

**Keywords:** indigenous, culture, spiritual

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This articles deal with the sculptural form of indigenous people of peninsula Malaysia called MahMeri and Jah Hut. The MahMeris lived along the coast of Peninsula Malaysia while the Jah Huts live inland in the interior of Malaysia .According to Roland Werner (1999:43) M. Coullird 1980:51 A. Ratos 2003. Marco Hsu 1999:107 observed that the wood sculpture created by these people is only recent around 1950. But what is clear about the beginning of making sculpture aided by the colonial officers furnishing them such as chisels, hammers saw and carving knife which they bought in from United Kingdom. Wood sculpture done by the indigenous people get its influence from outside the country with better tool and picture of other primitive sculpture. According to local history the origin of sculpture has been exited in the local community long time ago during their for fathers which the called Sepili. Sepili is a small soft sculpture made from palm leaves, clay and drift wood to be used in the medicinal ritual. The indigenous people in Peninsula Malaysia comprised of two groups the Senoi is the main community make sculpture of Sepili or the model of the original spirit. When they were discovered by the officers from the indigenous department of Malaya at that in 1950 the visitors made up of British officers were interested in the carving of the indigenous peoples so they brought with them some modern apparatus such as chisels, hammer, saw drill and also carving knives which they brought along with them. Through the interview with the local informants Mr Semi bin Awas who is also an expert on wood carving himself informed the researcher that even the photograph has been brought by the officers from the indigenous department during the early years when he started to make the sculpture and mask. So others than the local knowledge the carvers also get extra input from magazine and books available to them. During those early years the officers often visited them especially a Malay officers by the named of Hossein Enas a famous Malaysia artist by his own right also involved in the teaching of local indigenous people. The officers also help other people who were not working with the wood so that they can also work on other wood product such as making chair and domestic utensils. Usually in order to help the primitives peoples the officers even bought their works to the nearest town to be sold to local collectors or tourist.

## **2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCULPTURE AND MASK**

There are many shapes, sizes and forms of mask created by the indigenous carver and mask has their own name according the good and bad spirit. When the carver acquired a piece of wood in the form of block of wood usually 4 feet x 4 feet x 3.5 feet the carver started his process of making mask after he usually guided by the drawing and by the mark that he has made on various area on the wood. They usually used simple tool since the carver did not have money to buy modern tool thus they make uses of things that they can find around their houses and their environment .The process of carving done during the wood are still wet because it is easier to cut and carve during that time because the wood still in the soft state. They used machete and knife to cut wood and simple chisels to make hollow and to create holes in the wood surface. They seldom use paint to colour the images of the mask but just relay on the shape and form that they have carved .Prior to the carving the wood the carver usually recite mantra and read a short prayer so as their work will be done in a proper way since the images that they make is a religious and spiritual. Name was given to the character and the form of the mask and sculpture. Sometime both of the figurative sculpture and mask have the same name because they carry different function during the ritual performances.

Carving wood to makes sculpture and mask was a culture among peoples in Peninsula Malaysia and yet sculpture and mask not familiar with some community because of the taboos that sculpture identify with demon, negative being and ghost.

## **3. THE MATERIAL OF SCULPTURE**

The kayunireh or the local magahony (*Carpa Moluccaenis*) is one of the materials used in the making of local wood carving. It is a hard wood grown in the surrounding jungle. The mixture of salt and fresh water in the coast prepares the suitable place for the growing of that particular wood. The mature tree can reach up to forty feet tall. The bark of the matured tree covered by rough textured while not matured tree have smooth bark and the wood has yellow colour. This wood cannot be used by other product according the elders carver in that village one Pion bin Bumbun. (200)

### **3.1 The ritual of felling the tree**

A group of villagers went to the jungle by boat looking for matured tree to cut down for the purpose making mask and sculpture. Therefore their aim to look for perfect tree matures, because matured tree have beautiful red colour. When they have found the tree they have to perform a ritual before cutting down the particular tree. First the elders in the group usually a shaman or “Bomoh” and sometime the headman had to

perform the following: put a stick of cigarette in the plate, and also some tobacco, two banana, and half full of cooked rice. Immediately they have to return to the village and wait for the sign to appear to them, usually the sign will appear in their dream, once they have the dream then they go back to the particular tree that they left the other day and begin the process of cutting when the spirit have been appease. This ritual to appease the tree spirit has to be performing by any groups every time the need to cut down the nirehbatu tree to make carving only. They believe if they don't perform this ritual the felled tree usually not perfect for carving because crack will appear, the colour will turn yellow not red, and usually the carving proceed will not end smoothly. Sometime if the nirehbatu tree could not be found or maybe there were not enough trees to cut another type of soft wood can be used in carving the sculpture. (Arief bin Embing 2005)

### **3.2 The wood sculpture**

Every indigenous society is synonym with the folklore, myths or oral literature therefore the MahMeri have vast collection of traditional folklore so that the story can be used to educate and control the people in the group. In order to disseminate the world-view of the society the elders of the group create sculpture base on the local folklore and myths. Thus the finished product in the form of mask which ones can wear during the ritual dance and figurative sculpture so they can use in ritual called Bes, Ghost, Moyang. Bes and Moyang is the good spirit which teach the good things whilst the Ghost is the bad spirit. The mask is a very popular and universal product make by every society around the world and sculpture happen to be one of the oldest traditions in human history the same thing happens in the MahMeri society. Several carver have acquired the skill from their fore father to turn out hundreds of sculpture to be used in the community and also for sale outside the village and for tourist.

A particular mask called Moyang Jo-Oh usually worn by the dancer and perform every year during All Saint Day usually on the 10<sup>th</sup> March every year, to welcome the spirit of their ancestors. According to J. Lingget

... "Given this belief that spirit reside behind the face, primitive man found it natural enough to construct representation of his gods and his spirit in facial images."

The dance called "Sewang" performs collectively by the people in the village using the bamboo xylophone by knocking the empty bamboo of various sizes to create sound.

During the performance of sewang dance the leader of the dance troupe will perform the circular movement and move in circle several time according with the music around the hall of the temple while the leader wearing the Moyang Bajos mask in order to create the spectacle of the spirit that he is wearing.

According to Werner (1980: 15) the indigenous people create mask for the sake of performing ritual and also cultural belief. And the sculpture belief have magical cure for many diseases and charm among the community.

Whilst the sculpture is usually used in the ritual during the All Saint Day. The ritual takes place in the village temple and the sculpture place on either side where the Shaman sat in the middle of the hall while the villagers will form a straight line and get blessing from the shaman. Each individual will be blessed with a white mark on the forehead after they has under goes with the ritual.

There are many type of wood sculpture makes by the indigenous sculpture of MahMeri lived along the coast of Straits of Malacca in the state of Selangor. The works has varieties of shape, sizes, form and feature. The style of the sculpture based on the biomopic, zoomophic and anthromopic, However All the shape created by them based on the traditional folklore, oral documentary and also the local knowledge such as taboo, religion and culture. One good example is the sculpture of Spirit of Katakalaor, the spirit in the image scorpion and frog or moyangtukal or the spirit of Pumkin. The reason why the Frog and scorpion has been the subject matter for the sculpture because these common creatures can be found around the villages since the villages located in the jungle. Many other animals are also being used by the local to create mask and sculpture in order to transmit the concept of the myths and folklore. The other famous character based on the local myths is TokNaning. TokNaning was a respected leader of the village. Thus the images of tok naming are realistic and adorned with head dress and all other paraphenliafit for a headman. Other classic character of mask and sculpture popular with the carver and the collector are Moyang TetekLanjut or The spirit of elongated brest, Moyang, MoyangKatak Kala or spirit of frog and scorpion, MoyangLembu or Spirit of Bull the spirit of monitor lizard. The character of the spirit usually given by the shaman and sometime it cannot be change because it might causes bad omen and other negative effect to the carver and peoples. In order to analysed the form and shape of the sculpture it can be summarize into seven categories.

No.	Formed and shape	The Spirit
1.	Spiral	Spirit Kuhal, spirit Pintal, spirit cyclone, spirit anchor, spirit serpent.
2	Totemic	Spirit Frog and scorpion, spirit pelatong, spirit Durian, spirit warrior.
3	Serpent	Ampai spirit, spirit Elephant, spirit Phytan, Spirit dragon, spirit lizard,
4	Sea creature	Spirit Crab, spirit Fish, spirit sea weed, spirit seashell.
5	Figurative	Spirit Deer, Spirit Flower, spirit tiger
6.	Abstract Form	Spirit flower, spirit wild boars
7	Wild animal	Spirit Tiger, spirit elephant, spirit deer, spirit monkey

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The culture of making mask and sculpture can be considered recent in Malaysia art scenario. This is because only two of the indigenous peoples out of eighteen group of people is living in peninsula Malaysia make figurative sculptures and mask whilst the majority of the population did not participate in creating sculpture. By the way the mask and sculpture create by these people is not for the sake of arts but more on the ritual and religion. However having said that it seem that the traditional wood carving seem to generate the belief and spiritual effect to the people especially in the interior of Malaysia. Prior to the making of sculpture the are variety of ritual and prayer that the artist have to go thru especially the aim of ritual in making of sculpture is to appeased the spirit so that it does not bring bad omen to the community. With the arrival of the new technology and new education, majority of the population begin to be aware the importance of traditional art and how art can enhanced there in the modern world and the continuity beyond the twenty first century.

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