

# **Virtual Storytelling and Digital Archiving in the Cloud: Mah Meri Oral Tradition**

**Faridah Noor Mohd Noor**

**CHAIR, eCulture (APAN), (MYREN)**

**Aziz Abdul Rashid, Safia N. Suhaimi, Ammar Adanan**

**University of Malaya**

**MALAYSIA**

# Background of Mah Meri Masks Project

- Based at the University of Malaya (UM)
- Subject - Masks carved in wood by the Mah Meri, an indigenous community in Malaysia
- Objective of project is to archive images and stories of masks
  1. Digitize masks in 2D and in 3D images  
(MOU between UM and Multimedia University)
  2. Collect stories of each available mask in MSA

# **THE MAH MERI COMMUNITY AND THE RESEARCH SITE**

# The Mah Meri People

- Belong to Senoi Branch living in the coastal areas of the Selangor state in Malaysia
- Two communities, in Sepang and Carey Island
- Carving of masks still thrives in Carey Island only 7/10 carvers still active, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of carvers



The Mah Meri village of Kg. Bumbun on Carey Island, Selangor, MALAYSIA. Both traditional huts and Malay-style architecture houses dot the village with a primary school, a JAKOA office and community centre with several carving huts built for the community.

# The recording site



Samri's hut for his carving.

Permission to enter the village obtained from the Dept. of Orang Asli Affairs of Malaysia and Headman/Tok Batin of the village. Total informants: 3 + Tok Batin



Above: Mr Samri and Mr Kemi show how the traditional stove is made in the olden days while telling us the story of 'Moyang Dapur'

**MAH MERI MASKS**



# Mah Meri Mask Collection

- 111 masks @ Museum of Asian Arts (MSA), University of Malaya
- Size - 30cm (H) X 25cm (W) each
- Two types of wood used for carving:
  1. *Nyirih Batu*  
(Hardwood, brown with streaks of light brown)
  2. *Pulai*  
(Softwood, light brown color, lightweight)

# Types of Wood Used

Nyirih Batu

(*Carapa moluccensis*)



Pulai

(*Alstonia Spatulata*, Blume)



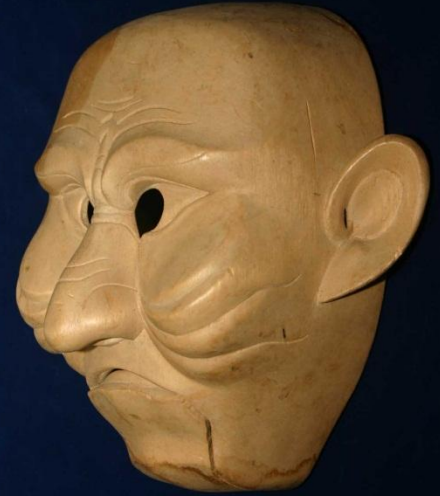
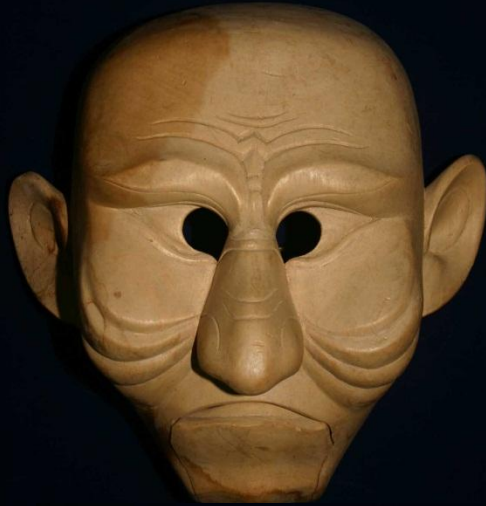
# **The Stories Behind the Masks**

# The Oral Tradition of Masks

- The Mah Meri people are **one of only TWO** indigenous communities who (still) have the carving tradition.
- Each mask is named after a spirit or *moyang*
- Used for **traditional healing** (*sakat buang*) and **ceremonial dances** (*Joh* and *Tengkeng*)
- To create **a repository of the audio recordings** of the oral tradition.

# The Stories Behind the Masks

- Each mask begins with the origin of the spirit
- Mask stories can be grouped into **three (3) categories (animals, humans, spirits)**
- Some stories become folklore of the Mah Meri people for certain practices
- Unfortunately, these are not being passed on to the younger generation, just like the carving tradition (lost of interest, unawareness of their own heritage)









# Fieldwork

- The stories were collected from three mask carvers as well as the headman
- Story telling was conducted in Malay first as they were comfortable in the language .
- Once transcribed and converted into a narrative form, these were read to the informants to verify and check the flow and the content of each story.
- In progress is the recording of the stories in the Mah Meri language for the portal and an upcoming **showcase in November 2013**

# **Virtual Storytelling and Digital Archiving in the Cloud**

# Virtual Storytelling

- Completed the collection of 60 'mask stories' in Malay and translated into English.
- Story telling on the portal will be in three (3) languages:
  1. **Mah Meri** → Mah Meri community
  2. **Malay** → Appreciation by Malaysians and other Malay speakers in the region
  3. **English** → Share with other communities with other oral tradition communities

# Digital Archiving in the Cloud

- With the stories in the portal, there will be a digital archive of the Mah Meri oral tradition on the masks besides other forms of publication.
- When compared to print publications, stories in the portal will be more interactive and more accessible to the younger generation
- Portal will be mirrored in several locations
- Archive will be available for future retrieval
- Storytelling will be set up with digital audio recordings and synopsis of these stories in all 3 languages

# **SAMPLE OF MASK STORY**

# Moyang Pelangi

Whenever there is a rainbow, it means that the rainbow princess is bathing at the well. She is considered to be a nice princess as she is the protector, apart from telling humans that either the rain or a storm is coming, she is also able to stop the rain. (weather)

It is a taboo for humans, especially pregnant mothers to point towards the rainbow with the forefinger. We should only mention its presence. When a pregnant mother points at the rainbow, that finger can be maimed or something will happen to the child in the womb.

(Old folks tale = Malay tale) (Politeness)

# Concluding Remarks

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- The idea to set up the portal is to share the Mah Meri mask stories with others interested in oral tradition, especially to preserve the colorful and rich indigenous cultural heritage in Malaysia.
- Open for other communities to add their oral tradition and stories, not limited to masks only.
- Hope to discuss with other interested researchers
- To create a **Global Story Telling e-Community** as a means of preserving oral tradition
- Create awareness of the importance to preserve oral tradition as cultural heritage



- This project was long over due (first mooted in 2006). This project took off when a grant was approved by the UM Vice-Chancellor in 2012.
- Talks with MMU to come in with technological support in 2011 actually triggered the grant.
- In retrospective, this is the best time for the project to happen. With **cloud computing, grid infrastructure and computing technology** it has made the project move faster. The only problem that can slow it down is the human factor.
- Finally, the project hopes the present and future Mah Meri people will benefit from this project as we wish to give it back to the community.
- After all, it is THEIR cultural heritage.

# References

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The Mah Meri informants

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Thank you for listening.  
Join us in the Story Telling eCommunity

[faridah@um.edu.my](mailto:faridah@um.edu.my)