

Songs to Revitalise Community Solidarity among the Indigenous Mah Meri of Malaysia

CLARE SUET CHING CHAN 

Abstract

Mah Meri musicians in Malaysia are calling for a revitalisation of community solidarity by adding fragments of new song text to their traditional songs. Intrinsic to the new song texts are narratives of working together, sharing and unity in the community. Through a reexamination of my personal interviews and fieldnotes with these musicians over the past two decades, I posit that their new song texts address social issues that emerged as the village adopted values of modernisation introduced by policies to integrate these people into mainstream society. Rather than outwardly protesting these policies, I argue that Mah Meri musicians challenge top-down hegemonies through a subtle approach of metaphor, rhetoric, and sympathetic appeal in their songs. They direct their efforts inward to their community to rejuvenate and sustain their indigenous values of egalitarianism.

Abstrak

Pemuzik Mah Meri di Malaysia menyeru supaya semangat perpaduan masyarakat dihidupkan semula melalui pengubahan senikata baharu yang diterapkan ke dalam lagu tradisional mereka. Intrinsik dalam senikata baharu ini adalah naratif mengenai kerjasama, perkongsian dan perpaduan dalam komuniti. Melalui penganalisan semula temu bual peribadi dan nota lapangan saya dengan pemuzik Mah Meri selama dua dekad, saya berpendapat bahawa lirik baharu mereka ditujukan kepada isu sosial yang muncul setelah kampung Mah Meri mula mengamalkan nilai pemodenan yang diperkenalkan oleh dasar untuk mengintegrasikan mereka ke dalam masyarakat arus perdana. Daripada mencabari dasar ini secara terbuka, saya berhujah bahawa pemuzik Mah Meri mencabar hegemoni melalui pendekatan metafora, retorik dan rayuan simpati dalam lagu mereka. Mereka mengarahkan usaha untuk menghidupkan semula semangat perpaduan serta mengekalkan nilai egalitarianisme peribumi kepada komuniti mereka.

Clare Suet Ching Chan is Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology in the Department of Music, the Faculty of Human Ecology at Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor. Previously she taught in the Department of Music, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (2002–22) and also held appointments as Deputy Dean (Research and Graduate Studies) (2011–17) and Chief Editor of the *Malaysian Journal of Music* (2015–21). Clare graduated with a PhD in Music (Ethnomusicology) from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa (2010). She is the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship (2005–7), an Asia–Pacific Graduate Fellowship in Ethnomusicology (2005–7), and an East–West Center Graduate Degree Fellowship (2008–10). clarechan@upm.edu.my

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INTRODUCTION

The Mah Meri (previously known as the Btsisi or Besisi) are one among eighteen indigenous groups collectively known as the Orang Asli (*orang*: people; *asli*: original)—the earliest inhabitants of peninsular Malaysia. They live in village settlements along the southern coastal plains of peninsular Malaysia and on Carey Island (previously known as Teluk Gunyek) in Selangor (Figure 1). The ancestors of the Mah Meri traversed these regions through river pathways on their *pahuk* (boats). At that time, they were dually orientated to the land and sea—as fishermen, crab gatherers, and agriculturalists in the mangrove and lowland rain forests. Prior to colonial occupation in the early twentieth century, Carey Island had a mangrove ecosystem that was biologically diverse with an ecology of fish, crabs, mud lobsters, shellfish, and other native plants and animals. Two-thirds of the island was converted into oil palm plantations by the British colonial administration (Karim 1981; Nowak 1987; Rahim 2007). Although much of their traditional territories have been taken from them, the Mah Meri continue to live in villages interspersed between these plantations. This article focuses on the Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun in the southeast of Carey Island, where I have been carrying out ethnographic fieldwork intermittently over the past two decades.

Mah Meri musicians in this locale are calling for a revitalisation of community solidarity by adding fragments of new lyrics to traditional songs. In this article, I examine what motivated the Mah Meri to write songs about community solidarity. The article examines the history of their songs over the past century, the governmental policies and initiatives that motivated Mah Meri responses, and the lyrics of contemporary Mah Meri songs that respond to these policies. Social issues that emerged in the village recently stem

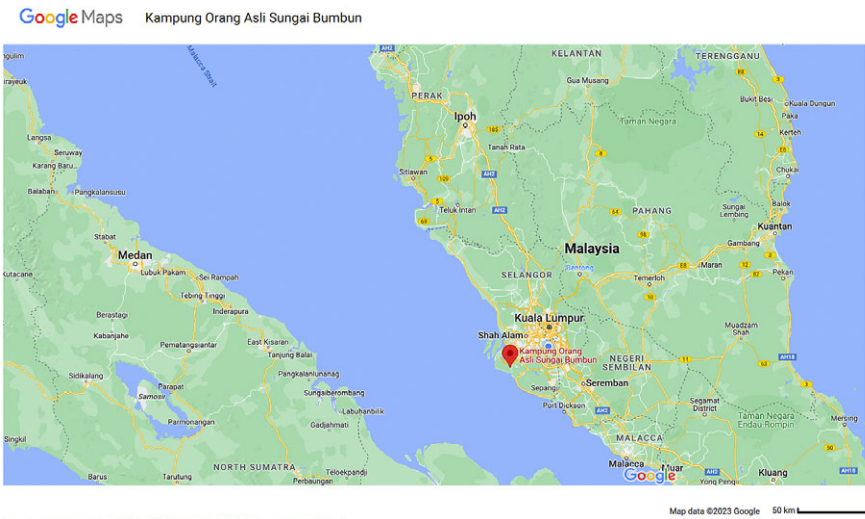


Figure 1. Mah Meri settlement in Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island, Malaysia. Source: Google Maps.

from governmental attempts to integrate the Mah Meri into mainstream society (Nicholas 2000, 2022). Through a reexamination of my personal interviews and fieldnotes with these musicians, I demonstrate how their new lyrics purposefully tackle these social issues. My analysis of the songs suggests the Mah Meri in Kampung Sungai Bumbun are calling for a return to a spirit of egalitarianism and community solidarity that was once common in their singing practices and social lives.

SONGS OF THE MAH MERI

The songs of the Mah Meri are performed by the *main jo'oh* ensemble. *Main jo'oh* is a music and dance genre performed to propitiate their *moyang* (ancestral spirits) during the annual 'Ari Moyang ('ari: day, *moyang*: ancestral spirit) (Figure 2).¹ The musical ensemble consists of a *jule* (violin), *banjeng* (plucked bamboo tube zither), *tambo* (double-headed drum), knobbed gong, and *tungtung* (bamboo stamping tubes) (Figure 3). Mah Meri songs express a variety of experiences of their natural environment and of social issues among their community. Before considering their most recent songs, it is necessary to understand the development of this singing tradition over the past century.

Songs of the Mangrove

Over a century ago, Skeat and Blagden (1906) recorded forty-two songs from the Mah Meri. Thirty-two described native animals and plants, five on fruit, two on trees, two on



Figure 2. The Mah Meri female dancers and mask dancers performing around a *busut* (mound) during 'Ari Moyang. Photo by author, 3 March 2022.

1. Several recordings of these performances are available at the author's YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@clareching5047/videos>, accessed 14 June 2023 (see also Chan 2023).



Figure 3. Mah Meri musicians from Kampung Sungai Bumbun. From left: Zainuddin Unyan, Maznah Unyan, the late Che Yah Unyan, Pinta Unyan, and Junaidah Unyan. Photo by author, 29 June 2009.

plants, and one on bathing (ibid.:635–89). These songs were performed during an event known as the *berentak balai* (rhythm of the pavilion). Many of the songs describe the physical characteristics, behaviours, and daily activities of the animals. In “Siamang Song,” for instance, the siamang (a white-handed gibbon) is described as swinging from branch to branch, plucking fruit from the forest, eating the fruit, and discarding the skin. The siamang is hunted, caught, and roasted by the Mah Meri. True to the egalitarian spirit of sharing, the meat of the siamang is equally distributed among the community.

“Siamang Song” (Figure 4) demonstrates the proximity of Mah Meri to native animals living in the lowland rainforests of Carey Island. The song texts also highlight the ecological diversity of Carey Island in the early twentieth century. The theme of describing the Mah Meri’s egalitarian culture appears in many of the songs about animals in Skeat and Blagden’s collection.

Songs of a Domestic Settlement

In the early twentieth century, Sultan Abdul Samad of Selangor commissioned Valentine Carey, a British rubber and coffee planter, to clear two-thirds of Carey Island’s natural mangrove forest for planting palm oil (Nowak 1987:38). This instruction led to the massive deforestation of the mangrove and lowland forests on Carey Island. The building

| Mah Meri Text | English Translation |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Telong telong pedas jintan</i> | Seek-peek for seasoning of jintan |
| <i>Krio-kria, haro-galo</i> | Crackle-crackle, mix and mingle it |
| <i>Dah layu, bente-leh siamang</i> | When it is scorched, cut up the siamang |
| <i>He jon muntet-mulih</i> | Do you give a-little to everybody |
| <i>Biar chukop dageng siamang</i> | Let it suffice, the meat of the siamang |
| <i>Chukop-leh nachar kadui hedet</i> | Sufficient for eating both great and small |

Figure 4. Song text of “Siamang Song”: transcribed and translated by Skeat and Blagden (1906:646–9).

of bunds to keep sea water from entering the plantations dried out river waterways that were previously used by the Mah Meri to travel. Lacking mobility and territorial independence, the livelihoods of the Mah Meri gradually shifted from that of nomadic sea people and swidden agriculturalists to settled agriculturalists on Carey Island.

Later in the twentieth century, Karim (1981) described a song and dance genre known as *jo'oh*. The *jo'oh* was performed to “invite the spirits of plants, animals, and humans to join the Mah Meri in celebration of an occasion of great rejoicing” (ibid.:113). The songs combined the previous song text about native animals and plants with domestic plants and animals. The references to *moyang* (ancestral spirits) in the songs demonstrated the belief in guardians and protectors of permanent settlements. In one example, “Song of Tok Naning” (Figure 5), an ancestral spirit exemplifies this phenomenon.

The inclusion of domestic plants and animals such as the *nale* cassava and *itek* duck describe the environment of a typical village settlement. The references to the forest deer (*meri pandok*), a native animal, exemplifies that memories of the old are still inherent in current songs. The emergence of Tok Naning, a *moyang* or mythical ancestral spirit manifests the phenomenon of a permanent village settlement with local spirit protectors. This song illustrates how Mah Meri song texts are often closely related to their lived experience and they retain elements of their past heritage.

| Mah Meri Text | English Translation |
|---|---|
| <i>Heh Tok Naning bangkuk lehok</i> | Our old man Naning carries a water-container |
| <i>Isi peleh nenek, peleh nenek</i> | He fills it with its fruits, fills it with his fruit |
| <i>E'eit koi pening, met gohop</i> | My head aches, my eyes are painful |
| <i>Tolong tangkal nenek kehei nenek</i> | Please grandfather makes me better, I ask you grandfather |
| <i>Itek pandok, itek batek</i> | The deer duck, the spotted duck |
| <i>Meri pandok itek batek</i> | Forest deer, spotted duck |
| <i>Tempat ma'ngeteb, ngeteb nale</i> | The place where humans plant, the plant cassava |
| <i>Nasib e'eit ngandong hatik</i> | My luck is borne to my heart |
| <i>Budik lep kele, ingat kele</i> | For a good deed, I will remember |

Figure 5. Song text of “Song of Tok Naning”: transcribed and translated by Karim (1981:247).

PATERNALISTIC STRATEGIES

A consideration of the historical relationship of the Mah Meri with neighbouring communities is required to address the reasons for new songs on community solidarity. Historically, the Mah Meri migrated from place to place to escape the marauding groups of Austronesian-speakers including the Bugis from southern Sulawesi and the Rawa and Kerinci from Sumatra. These Indonesian migrants arrived on slave raiding expeditions and attempted to gain control of trade routes for forest products (Nowak 1987; Andaya 2008). The Mah Meri *trimbow* (myth of origins) expresses their historical memory of these atrocities (Nowak and Muntill 2004). Similar to the Semai, who have been documented as a nonviolent people (Dentan 1968), the Mah Meri are inclined to avoid violence by escaping rather than fighting with intruding belligerents. As Wilkinson noted several decades ago, “the [Mah Meri] are shy, unwarlike people who have accepted without resentment the wrongs inflicted upon them by the past generations of Malays” (1971:18).

The Mah Meri, in the context of the Orang Asli, had autonomy on their lands prior to the arrival of the Austronesian-speaking groups from Indonesia. The arrival of Austronesian immigrants alongside the European colonisation of the peninsula—the Portuguese arrived in 1511, the Dutch in 1641, and the British in 1874—created political turmoil in peninsular Malaysia (Means 1986). From the fifteenth century onward, the Orang Asli’s status shifted from having control of their land to becoming subjects and slaves of Malay Sultans. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Orang Asli had lost their power in Malayu politics (Favre 1865). The Orang Asli, a nonviolent people in general, retreated into the interior of the territory to avoid conflict (Dentan et al. 1997:44). During the era of British colonisation (1874–1957), the Orang Asli were regarded as “no better than children,” unable to assist themselves, and requiring assistance from the government (Nicholas 2000). During this time, the British developed a policy of paternalism toward the Orang Asli.

Shortly after Malaysia achieved independence from Britain, a policy of assimilation was adopted by the Malaysian government known as the “Statement of Policy” in 1961 (*ibid.*:94). In relation to the Orang Asli, the policy stated that the government should “adopt suitable measures designed for their protection and advancement with a view to their ultimate integration with the Malay section of the community” (quoted in *ibid.*). The integration to the “Malay” section was later revised to “ultimate integration with the wider Malaysian society” or “integration with more advanced sections of the population” (quoted in *ibid.*:96). Orang Asli communities in Malaysia today are administered by the government through the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA). This department acts under the policies previously developed by the government for the Orang Asli. The Malaysian government perpetuates this paternalistic treatment and has even extended it to include a need for the Orang Asli to be “developed” and modernised. In modernising the Mah Meri, the expectation is that these communities will be gradually integrated into mainstream culture.

MODERNISATION STRATEGIES

Nicholas (2000) argues the Malaysian government's perception of a "developed" society is modelled after Rostow's modernisation theory that is based on the Western notions of wealth and freedom—a capitalist system and liberal democracy. As Rostow (1959) states, humans go through five stages of economic growth: traditional, preconditions for takeoff, the takeoff, the drive to modernity, and the age of high mass consumption. The fifth and final stage of growth is the supposed flourishing of a capitalist system characterised by mass production and consumerism. Rostow posits that this stage has been already achieved by many so-called developed nations. Malaysia's agenda to reach the status of developed country through their Vision 2020 (Ahmad Sarji 1993; Najib 2006) and Vision 2030 (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2019) outlined modernisation strategies toward this aim.

But modernisation strategies are used to justify the control of the Orang Asli. These top-down strategies include stripping them of their traditional territories through deforestation, logging, construction of dams and airports; subjugating their children to a standardised mainstream education curricula; indoctrinating the people with new religious philosophies; and providing incentives for conversion to mainstream religion. In the mid-1990s, the Department of Orang Asli Affairs revised the 1961 "Statement of Policy" to a ten-point strategy that "place[s] the Orang Asli firmly on the path of development in a way that is non-compulsive in nature and allows them to set their own pace" (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli 1993:5). The government's policy of integration and assimilation through modernising the Mah Meri were implemented in recent decades. Nicholas states that if the government's aim was not to control the Orang Asli with these initiatives, then programmes should "enhance Orang Asli autonomy, recognise self-identification, promote self-management, instituting free and informed consent, accepting indigenous religions and beliefs, and recognising traditional territories" (Nicholas 2022:102–3). In fact, the implementation of government modernisation policies have led to many unintended social issues among the Orang Asli.

SOCIAL ISSUES IN THE VILLAGE

When I interviewed members of the Mah Meri community about the musical life of their village during my ethnographic fieldwork in 2009, they lamented that social issues were breaking up the community. The main issues discussed were the *masing-masing bawa diri* (care for oneself only), *tidak apa* (could not care less) attitude, *lepak* (loitering), alcohol addiction, marriage breakdowns, and distrust in village leadership. I did not focus on the connection between their songs and social problems at that point but have since revisited the materials and reassessed their meaning.

Decline of Community Solidarity

One central issue raised by the villagers related to the decline of community solidarity. Kemie Khamis lamented that villagers seldom gather and spend time as a community anymore:

Now each person *masing-masing bawa diri* (does their own thing). During my father's funeral, the villagers stayed awake to await his burial in the morning. They told stories about their life, the *sang kancil* (mouse-deer) folktales, and stories about pirates, human metamorphoses, and lurking crocodiles. Today, during funerals, people come to pay respect but cannot endure till the next morning. I tried to keep the story-telling tradition alive but have lost the motivation now. When I begin to tell a story, the young boys today appear disinterested and leave. (Interview, 4 March 2009)

Here, Kemie is expressing discontent with the decline of communal relationships, the villagers' unwillingness to openly share their feelings, and the *tidak apa* (unconcerned) attitude inherent in the village.

Another villager, Titah Tebung, recounted that prior to having electricity in the village, they frequently gathered, chatted, sang, and danced at the *balai* (open-air shed) during the late evenings. Back then, music flowed from the house of the late Ahmad Kassim and his wife, Mijah anak Sakit. Ahmad was proficient in playing the *jule* and Mijah serenaded the village while strumming to the *banjeng* (plucked tube zither) with *jo'oh* and *joget* (traditional dance) songs. Titah explained:

In the past, the villagers bonded like a family, close relationships existed between families and friends. Now things have changed and each has his separate life. Previously, we never left the *joget lambak* behind. The *joget* was always performed during community events. Since communal events have declined [in frequency], the *joget* is less often performed as a community or even for recreation. (Interview, 16 April 2009)

Titah explained that music, song, and dance were excuses for late night gatherings. These villagers engaged in spontaneous song performances for fun and recreation.

The *masing-masing bawa diri* and *tidak apa* attitudes are the Mah Meri's equivalent to individualism in modern society: "Everywhere in contemporary society, people desperately search for self-fulfilment and try to minimise as much as possible interpersonal obstacles to the attainment of their egocentric designs—as the culture of individualism has come to represent not just personal freedom, but the essential shape of the social fabric itself" (Elliot and Lemert 2009:3). Factors contributing to individualism among the Mah Meri such as the decline of gatherings in the community may have started in the 1980s when modern resources such as electricity, water, and mobile communications became accessible in the village. Prior to this accessibility, the villagers stayed home during the night for safety and protection from wild animals and environmental spirits. Their entertainment during the night time was storytelling by adults who improvised new tales from their latest experience in the rainforests.

It appears that the social issues discussed in the preceding text were becoming more prominent in the village during my return visits over the past decade. In 2022, I conducted new interviews to validate the status, continuity, and changes in previous social issues. On my return to the village, I discovered that the Unyan family continued to practice Mah Meri cultural traditions such as weaving, woodcarving, playing traditional

music, and dancing the *main jo'oh*. While many villagers still gathered and respected the tradition practices, some families appeared less interested than before at coming together to weave, cook, and decorate the house. On a traditional costume competition organised by the village during 'Ari Moyang in 2022, Maznah complained that people did not want to even “think of weaving a creative costume design for the competition” (interview, 4 March 2022). The lengthy hours spent on weaving, woodcarving, cooking, building the *balai*, and practicing music and dance is where community building takes place. The spirit of working together for a common goal to appease their *moyang* is where community solidarity is developed. Cultural activities that express their worldviews as tied to ecological features are integral to their community solidarity.

Social problems among younger people

One of the common complaints of the elders about teenagers is that much of their time is spent hanging around aimlessly today. The elders described these problems as including lepak, alcoholism, materialism, and dependency. Exposure to excessive social media and its unhealthy content has also augmented social and moral problems, Yahya Sidin suggested:

Today the young boys laze around, lepak, and watch television all day. We try to encourage them, but they pretend not to hear. In the past, [when we were that age], we were already working and earning money. I advise the young people that if they are not interested in wage work outside the village, there are odd jobs for them in the village. But they think this is not important. (Interview, 14 July 2009)

In 2022, my new interviews validated the status of the social issues that were raised by villagers in 2009. The Mah Meri senior musicians bemoaned social issues among the younger generations such as *borak kosong* (empty talking), lepak, disinterest in cultural traditions, and an emerging culture of individualism. Maznah Unyan explained to me that these young kids today, “prefer to talk and pry on their friend’s issues.... Empty chat, talking about others’ issues, what happened to the household there ... rather than discussing which weavings are beautiful ... [the community tradition] is gone” (interview, 4 March 2022).

Another member of the community, Julida Uju, argued that the teenagers today are very sensitive when adults reprimand them. When Julida Uju’s parents did not allow her to buy a dress at a morning market, she was even more determined to earn an income to prove that she was able to buy the dress herself. This is not the case with the children today: “If we advise more, they will ignore us.... Sometimes their parents do not support us” (interview, 4 March 2022). Many of the teenagers are not interested in attending the ‘*Ari Moyang*’ annual celebrations today. Julida Uju explains, “teenagers hang out near the gates of the *moyang* house where the celebrations are held. They peer in with curiosity but do not enter to participate” (ibid.). When asked why the parents of other families do not encourage their children to join the preparations for ‘*Ari Moyang*’, Julida Uju said “[its]

because they do not have culture anymore ... [children today] do not want to waste time with their fingers to weave ... do not want to bother their fingers” (ibid.). From the perspective of these elders, the children do not have the patience to learn complicated weaving patterns, and they would rather spend their time on social media or video games.

Mah Meri children appear to be caught between two worlds—their parents experienced an education that was practical and hands-on. The outcomes of work were immediate, realistic, and based on basic needs. Their parents’ skills of fishing, crab gathering, and hunting are irrelevant to the children of today. Although weaving and woodcarving are skills that still provide the Mah Meri with some source of income, the children are not interested in such activities. Prior to schooling, knowledge, wisdom, and attitudes of the Mah Meri were transmitted from parents to children through economic, social, and cultural activities. Nowak documented a testimony of a Mah Meri woman’s childhood activities in the past:

As I grew up, I helped my mother take care of my younger siblings. By the time I was six, I was carrying one of one or another around on my back, babysitting them when my parents went off fishing or were cultivating in the swidden.... I helped my mother cook and bathe the younger children ... collect and transport water ... clear the land to plant ... pull strings attached to noisemakers to scare the birds away ... mother and I would cook rice and fish on the boat ... we stowed enough mangrove wood for fuel ... we would be away for many weeks at one time. (quoted in Baer et al. 2006:134)

This quotation illustrates how education was holistic from a young age. A girl would learn how to manage a household, care for her siblings, and develop amateur skills in gathering crabs. Parents of Mah Meri children are aware of the importance of schooling but they are limited in their personal ability to facilitate modern education. The elders experience a loss of autonomy in transmitting their indigenous skills and values to their children as the national education system imposes new, centralised “educational” values. A fundamental issue lies in the enculturation system that has shifted from the Mah Meri parents to education in national schools. The children have problems adapting to the culture of schooling or modern education where knowledge is not necessarily applicable to their immediate needs, and many Orang Asli children drop out from school early and do not complete high school (Edo 2012). The Mah Meri musicians’ call for their children to seek the advice of elders while they are still alive reveals issues of a growing lack of communication between young and old. The lack of interest in schooling is a serious problem among Mah Meri children. Without a certificate of high school education, today’s young adults find themselves in low-wage work in places such as restaurants, transport, grass cutting, theme park administration, or oil palm plantation work.

VOICES OF CONCERN IN INDIGENOUS SONG

Indigenous people around the world continue to face threats to their sovereignty, economic well-being, language sustenance, indigenous knowledge, and access to resources

that they depend on for survival (Sanders 1999). Many have composed songs that voice their unhappiness over environmental health and social ills that emerge from these threats. Several studies have highlighted musicians' concerns over the effects of economic development on the environment and social health of their communities. The Innu people have made appeals through their popular music for community solidarity, the promotion of traditional livelihoods, and respect for the words of elders particularly concerning warnings against alcoholism, drug addiction, and others issues (Audet 2012:374). A collection by rock musicians from country towns and outback communities in central Australia has addressed the health of the Australian Aborigines, with songs including messages to combat petrol sniffing, alcohol addiction, lack of personal cleanliness, childcare issues, rubbish disposal, and other health issues (Dunbar-Hall 1996:47). Rees (2016) has posited that *yuanshengtai* (minority) songs during the 1900s expressed urgent concerns on ecological degradation and cultural loss in China the wake of expedited economic growth in Veteran social activists also protested pollution and political exploitation through compositions of Hakka songs from Taiwan that extolled the beauty of their homeland (Lin 2011).

Among the Orang Asli of Malaysia, the Temuan of Selangor (Tan 2014) and Temiar of Kelantan (Roseman 1991) are two groups that have asserted their agency over loss of land. During the late twentieth century, the Temuan from Kampung Pertak in Kuala Kubu Baru, Selangor, were forced to relocate when the government built a dam across their traditional territories along the Selangor River. A group of Temuan musicians, and local popular musicians to produce a contemporary fusion music album (Akar Umbi 2002) which included songs that celebrated the beauty of the natural environment such as "Hutan Manao" (Manao Forest), "Kuda Berlari" (Running Horse), and "Burung Meniyun" (Singing Bird) (Tan 2014).

The Temiars from Kelantan also composed songs that deal with the spirits of modernity; they negotiate the influx of modernisation schemes by engaging with these changes through song. Dream songs were sites for mediating encounters with the forest environment (Roseman 1991, 1998), nonforest peoples and commodities (Roseman 2006: 186). A new song of the airplane and canned sardine spirits which Roseman documented provides a way for Temiar people to negotiate with modernity: "[T]hey may be forced to eat canned sardines instead of freshwater fish, but they can dream and sing the power of its spirit" (Roseman 2002:201).

While the Mah Meri experience similar issues, their main concerns today related to the modernisation forces that threaten to destroy their indigenous values. Unlike other indigenous communities who publicly protest and assert their voices through popular music, provoking politicians to change government strategies, the Mah Meri's voices of concern are directed inward to their people. Their call is toward change among their own community. Mah Meri songs over the past few decades focus on calling for a return to the ethos of a collective society where sharing and egalitarian values are ubiquitous. This behaviour is consistent with their historically documented traits as a nonviolent people that escaped marauding slave raiders and land invaders. The Mah Meri strategy remains

subtle and restrained, they speak to their community through songs in their indigenous language that remain confined to their village. Rather than outward protests, they challenge these external forces through a subtle approach—a call to their community to rejuvenate and sustain their indigenous values of egalitarianism.

SONGS TO REVITALISE COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

The Mah Meri are now permanently settled agriculturalists, weavers, woodcarvers, and wage earners on Carey Island. In Kampung Sungai Bumbun, they continue to practice animistic beliefs including remembering their deceased ancestors and propitiating the ancestral spirits that protect their villages during the annual *Ari Moyang* (*ari*: day, *moyang*: ancestral spirit; Figure 6). In 2009, I documented nine songs composed and performed by Maznah Unyan and Zainuddin Unyan in which they inserted new song texts into traditional songs. Maznah Unyan and Zainuddin Unyan are the children of the late Unyan Awas and his wife, Samah Seman, two well-known musicians from the village. Unyan played the *jule* and “composed” new tunes, while Samah sang and improvised song texts to the accompaniment of the *banjeng* (strummed bamboo string zither). When Unyan passed away in 2001 and Samah Seman suffered a stroke shortly after, Maznah was



Figure 6. Mah Meri Unyan musical ensemble performing music to accompany the *main jo'oh* during *Ari Moyang*. From left clockwise: Pijal Unyan on the *tawak* (gong), Razali Unyan, *tambo* (double headed drum), Gali Adam, *jule* (violin), Julida Uju *centong* (bamboo stamping tubes), and Maznah Unyan (singer and *centong* player). Photo by author, 3 March 2022.

automatically designated with the responsibility of leading the group. Due to the demands of performances, Maznah and Zainuddin had to rapidly create new song text that they could sing over traditional melodies.

The new song texts manifested narratives of a sharing and united community living together in harmony. These Mah Meri musicians utilise metaphor, rhetoric, and sympathetic appeal to persuade their community to return to the values of egalitarianism and community.

Metaphor

The “Song of Kuwang Kuit” (Figure 7)² is a traditional song about a fisherman who is out to catch fish at dusk. He observes a flying fox (*pteropus*), a fox bat, in motion and an archer fish (*toxitidae*) shooting water at the ants clinging on to a leaf floating in the river (verse 1 and 3). Interspersed in between traditional song texts that describe the wildlife and natural landscape are new lyrics about cooking a large cauldron of coconut curry *ka himang* (eel-tailed catfish) after fishing (verse 2). Food from this pot is then shared and distributed equally to family, friends, and relatives in the village. “Cooking in one huge cauldron” is a metaphor for sharing and working together. This song expresses the importance of cooking together, sharing food, and eating together. The use of this metaphor provides one way to communicate the euphoria of being united in solidarity as a community.

| Mah Meri Text | English Translation |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <i>Kuwang kuit</i> | The flying fox takes flight |
| <i>Melibat daun bakau</i> | Flapping like mangrove leaves blown in the wind |
| <i>Ka menyumpit</i> | The archer fish shoots at its prey |
| <i>Terhirit tintok epau</i> | The fisherman’s basket brushes against the water |
| | |
| <i>Masak mui bangak</i> | Cook in one cauldron |
| <i>Ka himang</i> | Eel-tailed catfish |
| <i>Jo’oh dek ngagak</i> | <i>Jo’oh</i> , don’t be directionless |
| <i>Pakat samak</i> | Work hand-in-hand |
| | |
| <i>Kuwang kuwang kuit</i> | The flying fox’s flight |
| <i>Melibat daun bakau</i> | Its wings like mangrove leaves blown in the wind |
| <i>Hik dah duit</i> | If you have some money |
| <i>Belanjak e’ed tembakau</i> | Buy me some tobacco |

Figure 7. Song text of “Song of Kuwang Kuit”: transcribed and translated by the author (Chan 2010:255).

2. Audio recordings of the remaining songs considered in this article are available on the compilation album *Songs and Music of the Indigenous Mah Meri of Malaysia* (Various Artists 2020) that was recorded and produced by the author. They can also be accessed via YouTube: <https://rb.gy/z63uo>, accessed 18 June 2023.

| Mah Meri Text | English Translation |
|---|---|
| <i>Log nyireh bakau log bakau</i> | <i>Nyireh</i> wood, <i>bakau</i> wood |
| <i>Pucuk tanjung kabot pucuk hele</i> | <i>Tanjong</i> shoots, pluck <i>paku</i> shoots |
| <i>Samak gerih dikau mak dikau</i> | One heart, no matter what |
| <i>Jo'oh sanjung sembah e'ed sembah</i> | <i>Jo'oh</i> , I perform with exaltation and praise |

Figure 8. Song text of “Song of Pera Gunting”: transcribed and translated by the author (Chan 2010:258)

Rhetoric

The “Song of Pera Gunting” (Figure 8) is about a bird, believed to be the Malaysian peacock pheasant. This bird is known for its “pera” and “ting” sounds and is associated with the myth of moyang Melur (Chan 2010:256). In this song, Zainuddin Unyan expresses the importance of remaining united in heart as a people with pride for their identity—“one heart, no matter what, *jo'oh*, I perform with exaltation and praise.” He asserts the need for the Mah Meri to stay united and be proud of their culture and identity.

Sympathetic appeal

In the “Song of Balaw” (Figure 9) Zainuddin and Maznah improvise verses on maintaining friendships and staying in touch. This is exemplified in the text “if we are friends, don’t part then ... keep in touch.” The text is worded subtly as a “plea” to visitors not to forget their people. It also accentuates the Mah Meri’s value in friendships. The phrase “we are still near, let’s discuss” call for the younger generation to come and seek advice from elders when they are still alive and available for support. These two calls demonstrate a sympathetic appeal from the people who hope for visitors and family not to forget them and their elders.

The insertion of new song texts calling for a return to community solidarity highlights the concerns of the Mah Meri about social issues occurring in their village. Metaphor, rhetoric, and sympathetic appeal are techniques deployed by the musicians to

| Mah Meri Text | English Translation |
|---|---|
| <i>Goi cawan delem edeq pecah</i> | Bring the cup slowly, don’t break it |
| <i>Nasik pulut hak parak holoq</i> | Place the glutinous rice on the rack |
| <i>Kaluk kawan edeq leh pisah</i> | If we are friends, don’t part then |
| <i>Hik jemput hey kawan ala</i> | We are friends again if you keep in touch |
| <i>Petik sireh kat tepi perigi</i> | Pluck betel leaves beside the well |
| <i>Tepi ubi cincang kena cincang</i> | The sides of the cassava are sliced |
| <i>Orang ramai tangkap ayam jinak</i> | Everyone is catching wildfowl |
| <i>Kita dekat sini lagi, bincang kita bincang</i> | We are still near, let’s discuss |

Figure 9. Song text of “Song of Balaw”: transcribed and translated by the author (Chan 2010:268).

reach out to the community. As a whole, these performances encapsulate their calls for a return to indigenous values.

CONCLUSION

In comparison with urban communities that have accepted modernisation as a way of life, many Mah Meri elders still hold on to indigenous values related to the land, the natural environment, and forms of community solidarity that resist a culture of individualism. While the Mah Meri do not protest their dissatisfaction with external politics outwardly, they continue to challenge hegemonies through messages directed inward to their people. Unlike other marginalised communities in Malaysia, who demonstrate agency over new agricultural impositions through everyday forms of resistance including “sabotage, foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, and slander” (Scott 1985:xvi), the Mah Meri use their singing traditions to challenge hegemonic policies and promote community solidarity. The musicians are not passive receivers of policies but active agents of change. They challenge hegemony by asserting agency through the creation of new lyrics which they add to traditional songs. Mah Meri songs now call for a return to community solidarity, working together to solve problems, seeking advice and listening to elders, and being proud of their unique culture.

In this article, I have drawn attention to social issues that the Mah Meri tackle through new song texts. But they also cherish the old traditions and are moved by memories of the past that are embedded in the songs. Gali Adam, a *jule* player, recounted to me how the traditional songs affect him:

For the lively songs, it makes me feel happy and joyful. On the sad songs like “Song of Sidud,” “Song of Gemah Lebat” and “Song of Si’Oi,” I feel sad and painful ... they really pierce my heart. During an ‘*Ari Moyang*, ... when I played the “Song of Sidud” ... when we got to the middle of the song, I felt very sad and cried ... I couldn’t hold back the sadness ... it seemed to touch my heart ... I couldn’t continue playing the *jule*.... I went away from the crowd for a moment [and] cried. (Interview, 21 October 2022)

Gali Adam’s testimony reminded me of the first time I played a recording of their songs to the Unyan family in 2009. I saw tears well up in the families’ eyes. When I asked them why they were crying, they told me they felt nostalgic and sad. It was as if they were listening to their parents and ancestors.

Alan Merriam argued that one function of music is to contribute to the continuity and stability of culture: “[I]f music allows emotional expression, gives aesthetic pleasure, entertains, communicates, elicit physical response, enforces conformity to social norms, and validates social institutions and religious rituals, it is clear that it contributes to continuity and stability of culture” (Merriam 1964:225). For the Mah Meri, the perpetuation of their musical culture is an important source for the sustainability of their

identity and survival of their people in Malaysia. In recapturing the ethos of a past society, the Mah Meri creatively fuse their memories of the past into the present in a colorful lyrical pastiche. The ethos of the past, the voices of their ancestors are combined with the plights of the present. They are woven into songs as powerful psychological tools that evoke nostalgia and longing for a once vibrant egalitarian community bound by the values of sharing, solidarity, and equality.

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