MAH MERI ONSTAGE: NEGOTIATING NATIONAL POLICIES, TOURISM AND MODERNIZATION IN KAMPUNG SUNGAI BUMBUN, CAREY ISLAND, MALAYSIA

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By

Clare, Suet Ching, Chan

Dissertation Committee:

Ricardo D. Trimillos, Chairperson
Byong Won Lee
Frederick Lau
Jane Freeman Moulin
Leonard Andaya
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ABSTRACT

Malaysia’s transformation from a colony to an independent modern nation-state has implications for its indigenous minorities. Examining three eras, the early 1900s, late 1900s, and early 2000s, I explore the internal and external variables shaping the construction of the Main Jo’oh, the central Mah Meri music and dance tradition. While its historical development shows continuity and change, I focus on ways in which the Mah Meri currently construct the Main Jo’oh in response to national policies, tourism, and modernization.

The Mah Meri reinventions of their performing traditions seek to recapture a past, reclaim a place, and perpetuate an identity shaped by their former ecological niche and communal society, which have experienced rapid transformation in the last few decades. The musical constructions of place and people are composed in various ways. First, the Mah Meri appropriate old cultural practices or symbols and give them new meanings. Second, they combine ideas from various generations of the opoh (extended family), including the memories of the mengge (elders), the nostalgia of the adults, and the imaginations of the young into new compositions. In challenging hegemony, the Mah Meri reconnect the past and present, resulting in a colorful inter-generational pastiche.

Propelled onto the national stage to promote government and tourism agendas, the Mah Meri experience the forces of various power structures that seek
to reshape performances for their own ends. While the Mah Meri accommodate these hegemonies by complying, negotiating, or resisting through their performing traditions, they remain clear in their own aspirations, engineering their performances toward an assertion and affirmation of Mah Meri identity.
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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<tr>
<td>COAC</td>
<td>Center of Orang Asli Concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>JHEOA</td>
<td>Jabatan Hal-Ehwal Orang Asli (Department of Orang Asli Affairs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOAS</td>
<td>Jaringan Orang Asal Se-Malaysia (Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POASM</td>
<td>Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Association)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Program</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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NOTES ON ORTHOGRAPHY, TRANSLATIONS, AND MUSIC NOTATION

All Mah Meri terms and texts presented here follow the Mah Meri-Malay-English Dictionary published by the Faculty of Language and Linguistics in 2006. This dictionary is based on the language of the Mah Meri from Kampung Bukit Bangkong on peninsular Malaysia. The Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun have retained more Mah Meri words than those on the peninsula, therefore a number of words found in the song text were not found in the dictionary. The Mah Meri musicians explained the meaning of these words to me. The latest Mah Meri dictionary written by Nicole Kruspe in 2009 is also based on the language of Kampung Bukit Bangkong.

The Mah Meri language adopted some Malay words but often excluded the use of the middle syllable for example, meminang in Bahasa Malaysia is known as minang in Mah Meri. The emphasis is usually on the last syllable. The Malay word pelamin (bridal stage) becomes plamin, selimpang (sash) becomes simpang, and pelanduk (deer) becomes pandok. Malay words ending with a vowel are modified to end with a glottal stop. Examples are kaluk (if), bajuk (attire), and samak (same).

The song texts I obtained from the early 1900s were already translated into English by Skeat and Blagden (1906). There was no Mah Meri version of it. The song texts from the late 1900s were transcribed and translated by Karim (1981). I did not change her translation of Mah Meri words or her interpretations of the songs written in English. Maznah Unyan explain the meaning of the nine songs I recorded
from the Main Jo’oh Troupe of Kampung Sungai Bumbun during my fieldwork in 2009. Interpretations of the song text were illustrated by the composer Zainuddin Unyan, Maznah Unyan and Julida Uju. Zainuddin had written down the song text based on primary school literacy. I used his text and changed some his spellings to conform to those from the Mah Meri dictionary. Since the song texts have deeply embedded meanings, it was only through many informal discussions and experiences in the village that I was able to draw connections between song texts and cultural context.

I notated all music examples in keys approximate to the actual performed key. But through Sonic Visualizer, a music software for viewing and analyzing music audio files, I discovered the tones I notated deviated slightly from the standard diatonic pitches. However, since the music was not recorded in tracks, the pitches played by each instrument do not appear in a clear, single visible line. Since this dissertation is not focused on pitch comparisons, I only showed the pitches obtained from Sonic Visualiser for the first three songs. Musical symbols describing expression and tonality and mnemonic syllables representing sounds produced from the Mah Meri musical instruments are as follow

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<th>Mnemonic Syllables</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tremolo</td>
<td>K= Kuyn (lower timbre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portamendo Downward</td>
<td>G= Gende (higher timbre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitch slightly higher than notated</td>
<td>Z= Zhang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitch slightly lower than notated</td>
<td>C= Ching</td>
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<td></td>
<td>D= Dung</td>
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<td>T= Tak</td>
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the first decade of the new millennium, Malaysia continues its vision in constructing an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), while embracing its cultural diversity. Indigenous minorities, faced with the nation-state’s ideals, struggle to negotiate their livelihoods and lifestyles in confrontation with the visions of the dominant ruling class. The relationship of the nation-state with its indigenous minorities is a continuous “tussle of war” between the binaries of power: colonialism/neo-colonialism with the dominant group controlling the rights and privileges of their “weaker” counterparts. In addition, the lures of modernization and globalization spread rapidly into the lives of indigenous minorities, changing their worldviews and adat (customs). One of the ways in which global trends are disseminated into Mah Meri life is through the mass media. Mediated images and information of ethnic performances for tourists have become a power that exists everywhere and comes from everywhere and produces domains of objects and rituals of truth (Foucault 1977). Mass-mediated information disseminated to the public becomes knowledge that constructs “truths” used to regulate others.

There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations. (ibid., 27)
Power is reflected back and forth between the hegemonic force and its supposed “weaker” counterpart. While the nation-state constructs “truths” to lure the indigenous minorities into assimilation and integration, they respond by asserting and reconstructing their ethnic identities. In the process, the identity of each ethnic group becomes defined, objectified, and invented. This constructed image is commodified in the tourist demands for “authentic” performances that manifest the cultural diversity of Malaysia. Tourists come away with a one-time experience of these indigenous groups, who have constructed a version of themselves by seeking an identity from their heritage of the past. Thus continues this subjectivity of “truths” invented with an agenda of indirect relation1 to its audience. This subjectivity is discussed by many—Kant’s “correspondent theory of truth,” Hegel’s “antithesis and thesis,” Foucault’s “regimes of truths,” and Baudrillard’s simulation as “truth”—and is problematized in the Mah Meri representation of their ethnic identity for tourism performances.

“1Malaysia”2 is the latest slogan that brands Malaysia as a “bubbling, bustling melting pot of races and religions where Malays, Chinese, Indians and many other

---

1 Performances constructed with the aim of asserting ethnic identity and resisting assimilation became performances for tourists. Ironically, they also reverted into performances for the annual ritual celebration of ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day).
ethnic groups live in peace and harmony.” The images below are some of the “signs” (Peirce 1955, 99) used to construct the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990).

Handsome men and beautiful women with bright smiles in colorful traditional costumes represent the Kadazan of Sabah, Indians, Malay, Chinese and Iban of Sarawak to provide “visual consumption of place” aimed at constructing the image of a happy multi-ethnic country. Accompanying these images is Malaysia’s tourism slogan, “Malaysia, Truly Asia.”

Note: Clockwise from top rear—Kadazan, Iban, Indian, Malay and Chinese.

Note: From left—Kadazan, Indian, Malay, Chinese and Iban.

Figure 1.1. “Malaysia Truly Asia” promotional advertisement. (Tourism Malaysia)

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There is only one place where all the colors, flavors, sounds and sights of Asia come together – Malaysia. No other country has Asia’s three major races, Malay, Chinese, Indian, plus various other ethnic groups in large numbers. Nowhere is there such exciting diversity of cultures, festivals, traditions and customs, offering myriad experiences. No other country is "Truly Asia" as Malaysia. (Tourism Malaysia)

However, missing from this “packaging of cultures” are the Orang Asli (orang: people, asli: original), the original inhabitants of peninsular Malaysia. Perhaps this omission is minor, yet whether it is purposeful or inadvertent, it reflects a deeper, subtler, and hidden complexity in Malaysian inter-ethnic relations and political scenes.

My interest in the Orang Asli began with a sort of personal “Orientalism” (Said 1979). However, it was not an orientalism of the Western gaze toward the East, but of a local urban Chinese toward the original indigenous inhabitants of her country. Descriptions and photographs of short, frizzy-haired men clad in loincloths, and holding blowpipes, plucking a bamboo zither or blowing a nose flute and topless women with babies straddling their hips fill anthropological books on Malaysia (Skeat and Blagden 1906, Evans 1937, Cole 1945, Williams-Hunt 1952, Schebesta 1973, Carey 1976, Dentan 1979, Rashid 1995). Such books stimulated my interest in the Orang Asli. Somehow the fascination for the “other,” those living in deep, jungle forested areas abundant with flowing streams and waterfalls, inspired me to learn more about their culture.

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Figure 1.2. Lanoh Negrito men and Youths. (Evans 1937: 7)

Figure 1.3. Sakai (Senoi) women dancing. (Skeat and Blagden 1906: 137)

Figure 1.4. Sakai musicians. (Skeat and Blagden 1906: 136)
Inspired by the images of Orang Asli tribes living in forests abundant with food resources, singing and dancing for recreation, I was determined to conduct ethnographic research on the tribe that had the most flourishing music. In 2004, I accompanied Colin Nicholas, an Orang Asli activist, on his trips to Orang Asli villages in Perak and Pahang. I was disappointed to find that traditional music was scarce and that only remnants of the “primitivism” I imagined remained. Each village was transitioning into modernity to varying degrees. What was of more concern was that the environment of the villages had been destroyed by deforestation, threatening the people’s subsistence livelihood. Large deforested areas caused soil erosion, flooding of lowland areas, clogging of rivers, and destruction of forest habitats. Ingrained in my memory was the visual image of the last hornbills in the area circling the sky, searching for a home among the deforested areas.

My first research on the Orang Asli began with the Semelai people, a group of Orang Asli living near Lake Bera in Pahang. Having visited several villages and encountered difficulty locating a village with flourishing traditional music, I was attracted to the ecotourism promotion of the Semelai on the Internet. Since the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) had funded the preservation of the lake due its rich flora and fauna, the “visual consumption” and literary rhetoric about Lake Bera on the Internet appeared very attractive. For example:

Almost 100 species of freshwater fish, 200 species of birds and 68 species of mammals thrive here. Endangered and vulnerable species include the Asian elephant, tiger, clouded leopard, tapir, Asian Arowana and the Malayan false

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5 Some of the Orang Asli villages I visited were the Semai villages of Pos Tenau and Pos Bersih of Ulu Slim, Perak; and the Semelai of Pos Iskandar, Pahang.
A gharial crocodile. The Purple Water Trumpet or *keladi paya* survives only in Tasik Bera.  

Such descriptions inspired me to conduct research in this rich habitat. Ecotourism was described as a thriving activity at Lake Bera. Canoeing, jungle trekking, bird watching, home-stay programs, cultural shows, and traditional handicraft were among the activities listed. The webpage flashed images of Lake Bera as a clear blue lake abundant with flora and fauna. However, when I arrived, I was disappointed by my expectation of a fun-filled adventure among exotic animals, such as the Malaysian sun bear, clouded leopard, gibbon, kingfisher, and pangolin. These animals were mostly elusive and did not appear often. The “exotic” promotional webpage was excellent tourism promotion (it brought me to Lake Bera). However, the “signs” and “signifiers” (Peirce 1955) did not coincide with the experience.

I also discovered many problems with UNDP’s mission to teach marketing, and computer and English skills to Semelai representatives, so that they could manage the programs above independently in the future. Nevertheless, I managed to record and transcribe music about animals and birds performed with *rebab* (spiked fiddle with skin made from puffer fish), *ginggong* (Jew’s harp), *gambang* (wooden xylophone), and *keranting* (bamboo zither), although there were only a few old musicians who played these traditional instruments. There was, however, a popular Semelai rock band known as RAMSAR.

---

Preliminary research (2003-2005) led me to many Orang Asli music and dance performances held in Kuala Lumpur and sponsored by various government organizations. I first witnessed a Mah Meri performance during the “Conference on Indigenous Peoples (2004)” at the Museum of Antiquity in Kuala Lumpur. Among others including Semai, Temuan, and Temiar, the Mah Meri performed their traditional dances. The Mah Meri music and dance performance, known as the Main Jo’oh, caught my attention with their “exotic” masked dancers juggling around female dancers who were dancing around a triangular busut (mound). The dancers were clad in bark cloth embellished with fresh green and yellow leaves woven into intricate plaited patterns. The musical ensemble exhibited an interesting blend of musical instruments including the jule (violin), banjeng (bamboo zither), tungtung
(bamboo stamping tubes), *tambo* (double headed drum), and *tawak* (gong). This performance was the Main Jo’oh, the Mah Meri performing tradition examined in this dissertation. The performance exuded an aura of primitivism and naiveté.

Curiosity attracted me to their village, Kampung Sungai Bumbun, on Carey Island. Having read a description of the setting as mangrove coastal plains rich with sea creatures and rainforest animals, I was surprised that I had to drive past rows and rows of oil palm trees before arriving at the village. On arrival, I saw a village in transition, both in livelihood and lifestyle.

![Sime Darby oil palm plantations on Carey Island. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)](image)

Figure 1.6. Sime Darby oil palm plantations on Carey Island. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

After experiencing the “visual consumption of place,” I began to question the traditional performances at cultural shows and on tourist programs. Who was presenting these images? Why the self-exoticized images or “staged authenticity” (MacCannell [1976] 1999). Was another power controlling and monitoring these grassroots troupes? Who were the producers? How much agency did the Mah Meri have in these performances? Was each performance different depending on its
context, venue and audience? What were the goals, subtle agendas, or inspiration for music and dances? Realizing that the visual representations of the media perhaps embodied larger complexities, I became interested in the various levels of power structures involved in the construction of contemporary performance. I then proceeded to examine how the Mah Meri represent themselves in their performing traditions, but realized that I could not isolate their performances from those mediated by other larger power structures.

**Background**

The Mah Meri are one of the eighteen indigenous ethnic minorities known as the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. In the 2004 census, there were about 2,896 Mah Meri out of a total of 149,723 Orang Asli.\(^7\) The Orang Asli made up 0.6 percent of the national population of 23,953,136 in the same year. The Mah Meri speak an Austroasiatic language\(^8\) and are maritime and mangrove forest hunter-gatherers and sedentary agriculturalists. Today many of them live on Carey Island, although some are found in small settlements on the peninsula.

There are five Mah Meri settlements on Carey Island (Kuala Langat district) and eight others on the peninsula (Kuala Langat and Klang districts—Table 1.0).

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8 The Negritos and Senoi speak a language that has distant relationships with Mon and Khmer, a subgroup of the Austroasiatic language family.
Source: www.maps.google.com

Figure 1.7. Location of Carey Island in Malaysia.
Figure 1.8. Mah Meri villages in Kuala Langat and Klang on peninsular Malaysia.
Figure 1.9. Location of Mah Meri villages on Carey Island.
**Table 1.0 Mah Meri Villages**

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<th></th>
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<th>Klang District, Selangor</th>
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<td>Kampung Sungai Judah</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kampung Sungai Kurau</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kampung Sungai Rambai</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kampung Kepau Laut</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peninsular</td>
<td>Kampung Tanjong Sepat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Kampung Permatang Buah</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kampung Teluk Tongkah</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kampung Pulau Banting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kampung Bukit Bangkok</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kampung Pulau Ketam</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kampung Bagan Hailam</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kampung Pulau Indah</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: JHEOA Kuala Langat, Selangor, March 18, 2009

**Statement of Problem**

From the pre-Independence period (1511-1957) to becoming an independent nation state in 1957, there were many changes in the political, ideological, economic and social landscape of Malaysia. Even more rapid change has occurred from 1957 to the present. These external changes, combining with internal cultural values attached to myths and cosmology inherited from ancestors through oral traditions, play a role in the production and reproduction of the Main Jo’oh. Mah Meri interactions with their environment as they traversed the peninsula in search of peaceful abodes are embodied in their music and dance. At the same time, cultural contacts with a potpourri of traders, migrants, and newcomers to the peninsula have enriched their customs and culture.
Early 1900s (Colonial period)

During the colonial period, the British powers focused on pursuing their own economic interests, maintaining alliances with the Malay rulers, and organizing Chinese and Indian migrant labor. The Orang Asli were mostly left free to roam the forests and sea. They were objects of fascination for anthropologists and researchers attracted to their “primitive” lifestyle and customs. An aura of mystery surrounded the Orang Asli, “authenticized” as primitive natives, and orientalized for their utopian life in the backwaters.

Geographical proximity, migration, and interaction through trade with other Austroasiatic and Malay-Indonesian groups, as well as the Portuguese, Middle Easterners, and others along the southern coastal plains, have culturally enriched Mah Meri music. In addition to these influences, Mah Meri musical heritage was embedded in memory and transmitted through oral traditions. Shaped by mythology, cosmology, animism, and custom, Mah Meri music was central to healing ceremonies. It was also used to propitiate the moyang (ancestral spirit– see Chapter 2), and for leisure and recreation.

British colonialism brought in many Chinese and Indian laborers to work the tin mines and plantations during the late 19th and 20th century, increasing the cultural diversity of the peninsula. During the 1900s, an estimated 20,000 acres out of 35,000 acres (Figure 1.9) of the mangrove and rainforest habitat of Carey Island (the Mah Meri abode) were converted into oil palm plantations (Nowak 1987). A gradual environmental decline took place beginning with the extinction of native flora and fauna, drying up of rivers, and the contamination of well water, which
resulted in destruction of the basic resources crucial to Mah Meri subsistence living. Reflections of this changing ecology can be seen in the material, musical, and cultural contents of their performing traditions (Chapters 4 and 7).

**Postcolonialism (Late 1900s)**

The oil palm estates continued to expand in the post-colonial period, resulting in a gradual extinction of endemic flora and fauna, and the disruption of the natural ecosystem. Many areas previously available for fishing, hunting, and recreation were now not accessible. The emergence of an Independent Malaysia as a nation-state brought many impacts on the livelihood of the indigenous minorities in the peninsula. The Malaysian government, under the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), changed its strategy from the British method of soliciting Orang Asli support to one of paternalism. Nicholas states that the Malaysian government believes it is acting in the Orang Asli’s best interests through its policies of assimilation, development, and modernization. Education, medical amenities, electricity, and water are among the many modern “improvements” introduced to Orang Asli villages (Nicholas 2000, 44). These improvements are intended to convert Orang Asli paradigms, influencing them to view modernization as the ultimate achievement of humanity, and to dismiss their traditional cures, healing ceremonies, and taboos as primitive and backward. The modernization model is part of the nation-state’s agenda to reach the status of developed country, a goal expressed in Vision 2020 (Ahmad Sarji 1993, Najib 2006). Accelerating the

---

9 Jabatan Hal-Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA) or Department of Orang Asli Affairs.
implementation of such goals was the construction of a bridge (50m) that connected Carey Island to the peninsula, providing a geographic access route for local and global influences.

Figure 1.10. Carey Island bridge. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Another external variable that has impacted the Main Jo’oh is the expansion of the tourism industry in Malaysia. Catapulted into the broader national and international scene, the Mah Meri are exposed to new soundscapes and visual representations, possibly influencing the music established in their previous forest and sea environment and centuries of cultural contact from the south. Tourism influenced the way the Mah Meri represented themselves on stage, resignifying the function of traditions for accompanying rituals and festivals to one commodified for economic returns. Tailoring their performances for the “tourist gaze” (Urry [1990] 2000) resulted in changes to the Main Jo’oh.
Postcolonialism: Early 2000s

Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been an influx of globalization trends. Digital technology and the information age have established their foundations in Malaysia. Televisions, CD players, karaoke sets, cell phones, digital cameras, handycams, and ipods have found their way into Mah Meri villages. Some teenagers spend their savings on expensive cell phones, mainly used to capture photos, play games, and download mp3 music. Malay, Orang Asli, Indonesian, and Western songs are among the Mah Meri teenagers’ favorites. The guitar is the main instrument strummed for leisure. In school, the music teacher exposes the children to local and western songs and dances. Most of the Mah Meri do not know the song texts for their traditional songs.

Figure 1.11. Mah Meri primary (elementary) school children from SK Bumbun on Carey Island taking part in a multicultural dance competition—Malay, Chinese, Indian and Mah Meri. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
Globalization, another form of colonialism, has emerged in the village. In Malaysia, colonialism spread through churches, schools, and the media in large cities and urban areas. It did not much affect the Orang Asli or replace their indigenous cosmology, traditions, and customary law. Globalization, however, appears to be a more powerful catalyst for change. It uses the overwhelming pressure of homogenization to teach us that indigenous political, economic, cultural, and knowledge systems are obstacles to progress (Mander and Tauli-Corpuz 2006).

Unlike the period of the late 1900s when there was little awareness of the effects of these large power structures, these variables are currently not left unchallenged by the Mah Meri. While exposure to globalization has brought capitalism and consumerism, it has also brought in human rights activists and non-government associations that create awareness of the implications of national policies, tourism, and modernization10 (Chapter 2). Ironically, the exposure of the Mah Meri musicians and performers to consumerism, individualism, and capitalism when they are brought “on tour” (Rojek and Urry 1997) evokes their realization of the negative sides of the modern world. Watching the destruction of their ancestral territories, the extinction of flora and fauna, and the lack of forest and river resources for subsistence has caused anguish and disappointment, as well as nostalgia for a past simple communal life in a pristine natural environment. However, the Mah Meri also realize that one of the ways to maintain their value to the country is to make the government dependent on them for their arts and performing traditions.

10 COAC (Concern of Orang Asli Concerns) and JOAS (Indigenous People's Network of Malaysia) .
Despite their marginalized status, Mah Meri music and dance are fetishized and exoticized by mass-media images in tourist guidebooks, Internet sites and in travel magazines. Already “branded” in Malaysia’s touristic space for their intricate weavings, exotic woodcarvings and masks of moyang (ancestral spirits), and the Main Jo’oh (their music and dance), the Mah Meri use these assets to assert their place and presence on Carey Island and their unique identity among Malaysia’s diverse peoples.

Notes: Clockwise from top left—Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang (Achik), Moyang Pongkol (Jali), Moyang Tok Naning (Farizal), Diana Uju, Rabbayah Sidin, Julida Uju, Salmiah, Maznah Unyan, Che Yah.

Figure 1.12. The 2009 Main Jo’oh Troupe of Kampung Sungai Bumbun. (photo by Clare Chan)
The burgeoning tourism industry has become a vehicle for the exhibition of difference and diversity. Paradoxically, refuting the very notion it aims to create, Malaysia highlights cultural diversity as the height of its attractions. Tourism re-energizes the Mah Meri to rejuvenate, recall, and reinvent their traditional performing arts.

Though their formation is encouraged by the government, local desire to display difference implicitly critiques government attempts to create national unity. These troupes thread a fine line between cooptation and subversion. Performing distinct “traditional” material of their own, they function as social safety valves—by this means governments, in effect, contain minorities by giving them the illusion of freedom of expression. Ethnic diversity, discouraged in other domains, “is valued, honored, even apotheosized, but only as long as it remains at the level of display, not belief, performance, not enactment.”¹¹ (Sarkissian 1988, 2)

Tourism performances provide a space where Mah Meri can claim that they are merely performing and not instigating trouble. Masked in performance and language, the Mah Meri use the Main Jo’oh as a medium for asserting their identity in “non-threatening” ways.

Objective of Research

The aim of this dissertation is to examine how the Mah Meri reconstruct the Main Jo’oh, their music and dance tradition, in response to national policies, tourism, and modernization. Central to this dissertation is the study of continuity and change through the analysis of elements of music, song texts, dance, costumes, and props that have been retained, eliminated, and innovated—adjustments made through selective processes determined by Mah Meri aesthetics. I utilize

¹¹ Acciaioli 1985, 161
contemporary theories regarding tourism and globalization, in addition to postmodern theories, for understanding the choices made by the Mah Meri.

This dissertation departs from the classic studies of music as culture (Merriam 1964), music as society (Seeger 2004), music as social structure (Feld 1990, Roseman 1991), and music as “humanly organized sound” (Blacking 1967) to examine music responding to larger power structures. Merriam, Seeger, Feld, Roseman and Blacking focused on the relationship between music and social-cultural-ecological aspects among tribes or groups. The recontextualization of the Main Jo’oh, from ritual enactment to stage presentation, has subjected it to larger power structures. The Mah Meri’s exposure to tourist agents and cultural officers, local and global audiences, and modern life has also resulted in the modification of the Main Jo’oh. I explore music and performance within the context of these larger power structures. I refer to these power structures—national policies, tourism, and modernization—as “hegemonies” (Gramsci 1992), because those dominated internalize the premises and categories of these dominating structures, and therefore control is achieved through “consensual agreement. The Mah Meri respond to these hegemonises by complying, negotiating, or resisting changes incurred by tourist agents or cultural officers.

The Mah Meri’s choices for the reconstruction of the Main Jo’oh are largely influenced by two phenomena: 1) the tourist gaze and 2) the desire to assert ethnic identity in the face of globalization. They respond to the nation-state’s policies of assimilation and integration of the Orang Asli into the mainstream community by asserting their identity and presence through the Main Jo’oh. They manifest their
place and presence through the composition of new songs, costume embellishments, dance movements, and props that demonstrate the place (flora and fauna) and presence (social and cultural activities) on Carey Island. While trying to recapture the imagery of a past ecological niche and traditional culture, the Mah Meri also portray contemporary life through their changing environment and more modern life style.

Mah Meri entry into the tourism space\textsuperscript{12} has spurred the need for more “spectacular” and innovative performances. Participation in the tourism industry and performing for entertainment, the Mah Meri experience escalating levels of pressure to compete and satisfy a global audience’s taste. Jameson notes:

\begin{quote}
Aesthetic production . . . has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh wave of ever more novel-seeming goods, at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasing function and position to aesthetic innovation experimentation. (Jameson 1991, 4-5).
\end{quote}

The Mah Meri have also reconstructed the Main Jo’oh to suit the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990). Their interaction with local and global audiences in their village and beyond expose them to the aesthetics of a modern society for performance spectacles, cultural diversity, primitivism and pristine life style, and natural sounds.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} Concepts and authors from tourism studies have been useful. These include staging authenticity, back and front regions, semiotics of attraction (MacCannell 1976), “commodity fetishism” (Marx 1992) and alienation (ibid. 1964), simulacra (Baudrillard 1994), authenticity and commodification (Cohen 1988), the tourist gaze (Ury 1990) and the tourism “bubble” (Rojek and Urry 1997). Both Rosaldo (1989) and Cohen (1988) suggest a positive effect for tourism. Stillman (1996), Kaepllar (1977), Nowak (2004), and Bendorups (2006), describe how staged performances are used to assert identity. Cultural performances structured for tourist shows are presented by Trimillos (1988), Stillman (1996), Marion (1988), Picard (1990), and Sarkissian (1998, 2000). Issues of power relations between the nation and the performers are presented by Lau (1998), Trimillos (2008), Straker (2008), and Yang (2009), while contributions from cultural agents or outsiders are discussed in Cooley (2004), Moulin (2007) and Guibault (1997).}
The Mah Meri’s interactions with modern life—capitalism, consumerism, and globalization trends—stimulate their desire to recapture an “imagined” past ecological niche, and a society of communality and solidarity. Their imagination serves to refresh Mah Meri spirit, as well as attract tourists; simultaneously it is a trajectory for the sustaining of Mah Meri identity. In this regard tourism theories such as “staging authenticity” (MacCannell 1976) provides a framework for understanding the changes made in the music and performance of the Main Jo’oh. I examine how the Mah Meri “stage authenticity” through the modification and resignification of cultural symbols, as well as the composition of new music, songs, and dance movements.

Globalization as a process is useful in understanding changes in the Main Jo’oh performance structure. The desire for short, efficient, and compact spectacles reflect features of fast-food chains that aim at standardization, predictability, and efficiency. The music of the Main Jo’oh demonstrates adjustments made to suit a contemporary audience whose character is shaped by their interactions with material products and services designed for speed and efficiency. Globalization has also affected music as sound among the Mah Meri. I attribute the expansion of pitch range to an exposure to many more varieties of music heard on radio, television, and the Internet. The choices of pitches or ornamentation emerging in contemporary Mah Meri music are based on a process of selection—conscious or unconscious elimination and addition.

Song texts, staged weddings and mimed music dramas constructed through the rejuvenation of traditional culture are combined with contemporary
“inventions.” The Mah Meri compose new song texts by integrating fragments of song texts from traditional songs into newly composed song texts. They also respond with compliance, negotiation, or resistance, to the hegemonies of larger power structures in the production of stage presentations. Agency is also shown by their resistance or manipulation of changes imposed by these external forces, perceived as a bastardization of their culture and distasteful to their aesthetics. Foucault’s theories of power and authority, as decentralized and fragmented, is observed in the struggle and maneuvering for position and advantage in the resistance to external manipulation of Mah Meri staged performances, and the maintenance of tradition in the midst of modernization. Mah Meri ability to adjust and construct new ways of representing their identity in changing times is not novel, but one embodied in the spirit of the people, evidenced in their historic migration and travels in search of peaceful abodes in the peninsula. The survival of their people depended on their ability to adapt to changes then. Changes in the Main Jo’oh reflect the same Mah Meri behavioral trait—one of survival, determination, and endurance.

**Methodology**

This research was carried out through short visits between 2004 and 2009, an initial one-month summer research in 2007, and a final six months of ethnographic fieldwork from February through July of 2009 in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. My first experience of Mah Meri performance was in August 2004 when I accompanied students to conduct a day of recording and research on Mah Meri music. In July 2007, I observed the Main Jo’oh troupe’s rehearsals for about one
month prior to their performance at the “Rainforest World Music Festival” in Sarawak.

I lived with Julida Uju (dancer) and Gali Adam (woodcarver and musician), both musicians from the Kampung Sungai Mata opoh, conducting daily interviews with the villagers. With a Sony Digital Voice Recorder (IC Recorder ICD-UX91F, 4GB), I recorded and transcribed about 60 interviews from about 30 to 180 minutes long, during my free time in the village. Guided by the concepts of thick ethnography and bi-musicality, I tried to develop good relations and gain the people’s trust. I value the villagers’ voices; their comments are constantly used to affirm my theories. Transcribing the interviews was a tedious but rewarding process.

My daily informal chats with Maznah Unyan, Julida Uju, Che Yah, Gali Adam, and Zainuddin Unyan, the musicians and dancers, were a great learning process. Sitting around the open-air shed, learning to weave, and cooking with the women proved important in developing trust and friendship. Talking, chatting, and jogging with the children drew me into their world. The younger Mah Meri men were more reserved; therefore I only managed to listen to some of their guitar tunes. Zainuddin Unyan taught me to play the jule (violin) lines of the Main Jo’oh songs. Learning by rote was a challenge, but once mastered, the songs are remembered for a long time. I also played the jule together with Zainuddin when visitors came to the village and when they performed in Kuala Lumpur.

I recorded about 20 hours of Mah Meri performances in the village and in other places beyond on my Sony Handycam (DCR-HC30E). These videos are very
important because they refresh my memory of the atmosphere and the sentiments I experienced during the events, which gives me fresh insights. Similarly, listening to the interviews and people’s voice reminds me of how strongly they felt about certain issues. The videos were fundamental for the development of Chapter 8 where I discuss how the Mah Meri respond to hegemony. Through detailed reviewing, transcribing statements of the cultural officer, listening to the music, watching the dances, and observing the audiences’ reactions to the masked dancers over and over again, I developed the concepts inherent in this dissertation.

I used a digital camera (Sony Cybershot DSC-L1) to take photos, which provide evidence, illustration, and clarity for my descriptions of costumes, props, and dances. Skeat and Blagden (1906) and Werner’s (1997) photos of the village atmosphere, festivals, costumes, woodcarvings, and plaited leaves provide a basis for comparison. My photos will also be important to future research.

I encountered some problems during my research. I paid an Orang Asli (who was trying to make a living in the music industry) to record the Mah Meri music in the village. Although I had my own minidisc recorder, I wanted recordings with a separate track for each instrument. He placed microphones on all the musicians, but was not able to provide me with separate tracks, making it difficult for me to accurately transcribe some parts of the music, for example the *tambo* and *banjeng*. However, my fieldwork observation and videos of the kinetic movements of the musicians helped me transcribe what they played.

During my fieldwork, tour groups came sporadically to the village. Sometimes they requested Main Jo’oh performances. For some groups, I handed out
short questionnaires on their perception of the Main Jo’oh. This was not an easy process, but I managed to obtain feedback about why tourists choose to visit the Mah Meri. I had Internet access using a wireless modem. Besides performances at the village, I also accompanied the Mah Meri when they were invited to perform in Kuala Lumpur, and I interviewed some of the sponsors of these events.

**Literature Review**

Skeat and Blagden (1906) provide the earliest descriptive ethnography of Mah Meri musical instruments, song texts, costumes, properties, masks, and festive occasions in the early 1900s. Their collection of forty-two songs are compared with Karim’s (1981) collection of seven songs from Kampung Sungai Bumbun. My own 2009 recordings of nine contemporary songs and two instrumental pieces form the corpus selected for examination in this dissertation. Comparative study of the music of these three eras—early 1900s, late 1900s, and early 2000s, reveals continuity and change in the music, as well as the effects of political, social, cultural, and ecological change.

Karim’s (1981) anthropological concept of the relationship between the human and supernatural worlds of *moyang* (ancestral spirits) is crucial to the understanding of the function of music and dance performed at festivals and healing ceremonies in the past. I apply Karim’s explanations of Mah Meri myths and cosmology to Mah Meri dance choreography, weaving patterns, and song texts.

Logan (1847) names places where Binua and Mintira groups, possibly Mah Meri ancestors, settled, but later abandoned due to attacks from Malay-Indonesian
slave raiders. The music reveals cultural contacts resulting from migration patterns. 
Nowak's (1987) analysis of Mah Meri wedding rituals and gender relationships provides an idea of social interactions in the village. She (2004) expounds on Mah Meri hostility toward the Malays in the trimbow myth. Nowak (2000) is one of the first to postulate that Mah Meri assert identity through the Main Jo'oh.

Andaya and Andaya's (1982, 2000) *History of Malaysia* and Leonard Andaya's (2008) *Leaves of the Same Tree* trace the migration, livelihood, trade activities, alliances, and hostilities between the Orang Asli and an already diverse people in the peninsula. The history of Mah Meri migration patterns, their interactions with other multi-cultural Malay peninsula groups, and a mapping of political events help me to hypothesize sources of musical instruments, musical styles, and content of song texts in the various periods.

Matusky and Tan’s (2004) *Music of Malaysia* provides important guidelines, terminologies, and a taxonomic system for discussing and categorizing Malaysian music. I find their guidelines very useful for describing Mah Meri music. Matusky and Tan’s concept of texture (the various layers of instrumentation in Mah Meri music that produce a resultant sound) is the foundation of my musical descriptions.

A piece usually consists of several unique strata of sound: a melodic layer that is sung and played heterophonically with a melody instrument; a rhythmic layer with a specific pattern played in an interlocking style by drums; and the gong unit or colotomic layer played by bronze instruments. (Tan and Matusky, 2004, 11)

A similar description of Mah Meri musical style can be found in Miller and William’s description of the gong-chime ensemble of island Southeast Asia: “a stratified gong-chime ensemble has a four-part texture: colotomic gongs, a main musical theme, elaborating instruments, and drum patterns” (1998, 21). Matusky and Tan’s description of ronggeng or joget music (believed to have its origin in Portuguese dance music of Malacca) resembles that of the Main Jo’oh. Both Malay joget music and the Mah Meri Main Jo’oh developed in the same regions (the southern coast of the peninsula), and both are for social and community events. Before the eighteenth century, the Mah Meri and Malays maintained reciprocal alliances and trade networking. Therefore it is not surprising that their interactions would have resulted in similar forms of musical entertainment. However, although there are similarities, there are also differences in the music due to their belief systems, ecology, and “habitus” (Bourdieu 1990, 54)
There has been little musical analysis of Orang Asli music. One of the few studies is Roseman’s study of the Temiars. Roseman demonstrates they reproduce the continuity of a cosmology system.

... from songs received from fresh river fish to those from canned sardines, I trace a trajectory of musical and religious vitality amidst environmental devastation and social organization in the Malaysian rainforest. (Roseman 2006, 115)

Roseman’s research reveals that the Temiars make accommodations in their texts to reflect environmental changes while maintaining their own cosmological system. This parallels the Mah Meri song text changes in response to hegemonic powers inundating their lives.

Sarkissian has written about the impact of tourism on the music of the Portuguese settlements in Malacca. She argues that locus of identity does not lie in direct reference to Portugal, but rather authenticity is established “vis-à-vis a highly unusual localized understanding of the term” (Sarkissian 2000, 215). Sarkissian’s research deconstructs the notion of “authenticity,” supporting the notion of “invented traditions.” In a similar way, contemporary Main Jo’oh embodies new imaginations of the past and a resignification of old traditions for different functions in the present.

I support Nettl’s view that “oral tradition operates as a constraining, limiting directing force much more than writing.” These constraining forces stem from “the limitations of human memory, the rules of the folk aesthetic, the constraints of patterns already established, thereby creating a strong pattern of continuity from one generation to the next” (Nettl 1983, 188). This method of composition by transmission in addition to new methods of composition and “invention,” results in
continuity and change in Mah Meri music. Oral tradition and memory are like threads that connect the past and present. Thus the jule (violin) music, remembered and reproduced from memories of late jule players, combined with the incorporation of new musical elements, reflects this concept of continuity and change in oral traditions. Nettl (1983, 437) and Kartomi (1981) provide useful guidelines on the different ways in which cultures react, dictated by their power relations with colonizers, the functions and values of music in society, musical compatibilities, and other factors. In determining the origins of aspects of musical style, there is a tendency to relate newly-studied music to previous dominant genres, implying that the new genre has incorporated elements of the previously-studied style. Since Mah Meri existence preceded that of the other ethnic groups with which they are compared, I prefer to say styles “resemble” or “are similar to” instead of stating who was the first to use a style.

A second useful term is “indigenization,” for even though fragments of musical elements or styles from other cultures can be heard in the music, these imported elements have been “ingeniously molded into their music through a process of inclusion, exclusion, selection, and modification founded on Mah Meri aesthetics” (Miller and Williams 1998, 11). Miller also notes that “each country in Southeast Asia has evolved an individualized expression . . . even when a borrowed instrument remains unchanged, the musical style of the original culture seldom comes with it” (ibid.).

In adapting music for staged performance, I find globalization theories, such as McDonaldization (Ritzer 1993) and Disneyization (Bryman 2004), that describe
how people and products become organized, standardized, and canonized, have parallels with the changes in Mah Meri music in the contemporary era. Jameson’s usage of the term “spectacle” to describe the short attention span of contemporary society is also useful. I also use Jameson’s term “pastiche” to describe the Mah Meri process of contemporary song-text composition (Chapter 6) and my analysis of staged weddings and mimed music-drama productions (Chapter 8), because auditory and visual memories of song texts from the moyang combine with new song texts influenced by the Mah Meri contemporary musical soundscape and a conscious desire to innovate.

I also suggest that kinetic patterns, such as the fingers set in a fixed fingering position on the jule, have implications for the melodies produced in contemporary Main Jo’oh music (Chapter 3). I attribute the expansion of pitch range to an exposure to many more varieties of music heard on radio, television, and the Internet. However, the choices of pitches or ornamentation emerging in contemporary Mah Meri music are based on a process of selection—conscious or unconscious elimination and addition.

I see performance for tourists as satisfying visual aesthetics rather than the traditional functions. Cultural and ethnic tourists seek “authentic” performances to satisfy their “alienation” (Marx 1964), a syndrome of modern society detached from the fruits of their labor. I identify the Mah Meri situation with Marx’s theory of “commodity fetishism,” (ibid. 1992) whereby the symbolic attribution of

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13Fetishization then refers to the symbolic attribution of power to the object, believing that the power is in the object rather attributing it to human interpretation of the object (Marx 1992)
performance dominates its traditional function, and the performers often have little control over how their music is commodified and marketed today.

Previously, the knowledge and skills of musicians were fundamental for efficacy in healing or propitiation ceremonies. The existence of an array of “distinct timbral consistencies: the souls of each wild animal, plant, rock, or the earth – sounds characterized by distinct timbres, tonal rows, melodic contours, vocal ornamentation, rhythms . . . timbre of a specific instrument must be sounded during the summoning of that object” (Miller and Williams 1998, 8). However, the visual aspect of performance now dominates the timbral aesthetic. The intricacy of the woven costumes, dance movements, and humorous masked dancers (Chapter 6) command the audience’s attention, rather than the musical effects that put dancers into trances of cathartic release, freeing the community of their subconscious desires and thus maintaining their mental health in traditional times (Artaud 1976).

It may be argued that the exotic sounds of the Main Jo’oh (as well as visual spectacles) fulfill modern tourists’ desire for contrast with music based on diatonic scales, and hegemonic influences such as rap, jazz, reggae, and hip hop styles.

**Organization of Chapters**

Chapter 2 presents the history of the Mah Meri (sometimes via the Orang Asli) in three eras: the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial years. It examines their changing identity and relationship with Malay-Indonesian migrant groups such as Bugis, Minangkabau, Rawa, and others. It also looks at causes for change in their livelihood, life style, and migration patterns, and ultimately their settlement in
Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island. This chapter provides a brief description of their cosmology, belief systems, and important cultural terms related to the Mah Meri performing tradition known as the Main Jo′oh, such as moyang, and tulah and kemali.

Chapter 3 describes the musical life, musicians, and musical instruments of the Mah Meri. It draws on the relationship between Mah Meri musical instruments and music and their Austroasiatic heritage, ecological niche, belief system, and cultural contacts in the southern coastal plains of the peninsula. Combining historical data, ethnographic interviews, and musical analysis, I try to decipher indigeneity and musical synthesis (Kartomi 1981), which has taken place through exposure to many variables mentioned. Musical instruments and practices retained, eliminated, and innovated are compared among the three periods discussed. In the contemporary period (late 2000s), I examine the recontextualization of Mah Meri music in response to national policies, tourism, and modernization.

Chapter 4 looks at the relationship between song texts of the early 1900s and late 1990s, within the framework of ecological and community change. Songs and festivals of the early 1900s embodied an intimacy with nature and the flora and fauna endemic to the island. The Mah Meri’s livelihood as sea and mangrove foragers, as well as their patterns of migration, worldview, belief systems, and cultural contacts, provided the inspiration for their song texts. In the late 1900s, song texts embodied an evolved ecological system and a sedentary agricultural
community. This chapter reveals themes, issues, and descriptive images retained, eliminated, and innovated in song text composition.

Chapter 5 consists of a detailed analysis of continuity and change in the music of the Mah Meri, focusing on the late 1900s and early 2000s. The Main Jo’oh music is adapted from its previous function of music for ritual and leisure to stage entertainment. While pitch inventories, structural tones, florid embellishment, chromatic tones, and ornamentation reveal a growing exposure to western diatonicism and local flavors, Mah Meri aesthetics are also detected. This chapter traces the elements of music selectively retained, eliminated, and innovated in the Main Jo’oh music. I use ideas from globalization theory to further contextualize this section.

Chapter 6 examines the power structures (hegemonies) of the new millennium, which have extended to the larger dimensions of modernization, and globalization. Mah Meri song texts voice their concerns over the encroaching social problems created by these hegemonies. Currently composed song texts seek to recapture the ethos of a simpler, pristine, and caring society. In this chapter, I find Jameson’s concept of pastiche (1991) useful for describing song text composition—the congealing of memories from the Mah Meri moyang and elders with the “invented traditions” of the contemporary generation.

Chapter 7 examines how the Mah Meri construct their identity or cultural representation by asserting their place and presence in Carey Island through props, costumes, dance, and song texts. Responding to national polices of assimilation and
integration, as well as the tourist industry’s desire for authenticity and exoticism, the Mah Meri maximize their creativity by drawing from their ecological niche, customary traditions, and community activities. Designs for costumes and props, and new dance movements are created or modified from the traditional. Modifications through the resignification of cultural symbols reveal continuity and change—for example, the *bunga moyang* (spirit flowers) previously used for séances have been transferred into plaited patterns for costumes. This practice affirms Geertz’ theory (1983) that symbolic power of an object, resignified for tourist consumption, is provided meaning by society in changing times.\(^\text{14}\) The aesthetic choices made are influenced by the desire to assert Mah Meri ethnicity and perform authenticity.

Chapter 8 demonstrates how the Mah Meri comply, negotiate, and resist the intervention of tourist agents, cultural officers, and outsiders who construct mimed music dramas and staged weddings to create a “spectacle” for the tourist gaze. This chapter compares these events with their counterparts without outsider intervention. I find Foucault’s concepts of power relations and truth (1977) useful in understanding the relationship between the Mah Meri musicians and dancers, and the hegemony—the tourists or cultural officers.

In Chapter 9, I problematize my positionality as an indigenous scholar by national status only. I discuss how my ethnicity as Chinese vis-à-vis the Mah Meri is simultaneously an advantage and hindrance in the information I obtained. I present

\(^{14}\) It also affirms Baudrillard’s (1994) notion that the “aura” of an object loses its symbolic power through the mechanical production of the object.
challenges during fieldwork and highlight the importance of specific ethnomusicological methods such as bi-musicality. To end the dissertation, I suggest important areas for further research and my speculation on Mah Meri performing traditions in the future. Finally, I summarize my overall argument for globalization and tourism as primary themes.

The next chapter establishes the Mah Meri historical background and the contemporary construction of their identity in the context of the social and political climate in Malaysia. This knowledge is crucial to understanding the musical production of the Main Jo’oh.
Chapter 2

HISTORY AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF MAH MERI IDENTITIES: PRE-COLONIAL, COLONIAL, AND POST COLONIAL

Throughout history, cultural contacts with a variety of power structures have developed and modified Mah Meri identity. This chapter traces its history and construction throughout the periods of pre-colonial, colonial, and independent Malaysia. Internal variables affecting Mah Meri identity are their cosmology, worldview, customs, ecological niche, and intra-social relations. External variables are power structures such as colonialism, the nation-state, tourism, and modernization. These generate political, social, and psychological changes in the culture.

A history of the Mah Meri is not possible without locating them as one of the eighteen groups of Orang Asli, the earliest people in the Malay Peninsula. Therefore, Mah Meri history is sometimes discussed as part of the Orang Asli past. The recurring common themes in Mah Meri history are 1) their animosity toward the Malayu,15 2) their need to adapt in sources of sustenance, and 3) the paternalism of hegemonic powers.

15 Andaya, L. (2008, 241, fn 3) uses “Malayu” instead of “Melayu” to include those living in Malaysia and various parts of Indonesia, such as the east coast of Sumatra and offshore islands to the south of the Malay Peninsula. This term avoids confusion with the term “Malay,” referencing the dominant ethnic group in Malaysia today. However, after the British establish British Malaya, the term ”Malay” or ”Melayu” (spelled with a pepet e) now becomes used for those Malayu living on the Peninsula (Andaya, pers. comm., August 31, 2010)
Pre-colonial Malaysia

According to Andaya and Andaya during the first 1500 years of the Common Era (or CE), both shores of the Malacca Straits witnessed the emergence of flourishing international entrepôts\(^\text{16}\) where merchants from India, China, and the Middle East traded. The Malay world was renowned for its supply of resins (benzoin and camphor), aromatic woods (gaharu or eaglewood), and rattan (Andaya [1982] 2001).

Orang Asli-Malayu Relations

The Orang Asli were of great importance to the Malayu polities who administered international trade at designated ports. Their intimacy with the forest and their skills at identifying and harvesting specific forest resources made them indispensable to the Malayu who viewed them as elusive jungle foragers “whose intimate knowledge of their lands and ability to appease the spirits of the forests through magic spells and incantations enabled them to procure these highly desired goods” (Andaya 2008).

The mangrove forests along the southwest coast were considered treacherous mazes inhabited by swamp creatures such as the dangerous crocodile. The Orang Laut (considered by the Malaysian government as members of the “Orang Asli”) penetrated these territories to obtain resources such as the

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\(^{16}\) Local products of camphor, lakewood, incense, and gold were desired for international trade. These were exchanged for cloth, copper and ironware, musical instruments, beads, pottery, glass, and drums desired by the Malay region (Andaya 1982, 13).
multipurpose nipa palm. Their swimming and diving skills enabled them to extract shells, corals, and sea slugs from the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. A relationship of reciprocity and dependency therefore prevailed between the Orang Asli and the Malayu during the first millennium and a half CE. The Malayu saw the Orang Asli as partners in trade and admired them for their bravery in penetrating the deep forest. The Malay rulers awarded some Orang Asli with prestigious titles and gifts for their accomplishments, sealing the bond for further partnerships (ibid.). These close interactions of the Orang Asli with the Malayu probably account for similarities in their music and dance (Chapter 3).

However, this relationship began to erode due to changes in the economic demands of the international trade and the arrival of Islam. The Orang Asli-Malayu relationship that had been one of respect and reciprocity deteriorated into scorn and contempt, especially during the 17th to the 19th century.

**Mah Meri Origins and Worldview**

The origins of the Mah Meri are speculative. Although they have language affiliations with the Mon-Khmer speakers in mainland Southeast Asia, their route of entry into the Malay Peninsula is ambiguous. Whether they came by sea through the Straits of Malacca, by land through Thailand, or developed in situ cannot be ascertained. Knowledge of their origins is important to the examination of

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17 The leaves of the nipa palm were used to make mats and its fruits for a fermented drink, while the bark of mangrove yielded tannin and timber for firewood (Andaya 1982, 12).
18 The Chinese sought the sea slug known as *tripang* as an ingredient for soups and medicinal preparations. Tortoise shells and cowries used as coins were mentioned in Chinese sources to have been derived from the Malay region (Andaya 1982, 13).
continuity and change in Mah Meri music. The next section describes Mah Meri livelihood, cultural values, and cosmology—beliefs about human creation, the Great Deluge, and other worldviews inherited through oral tradition. These worldviews are the foundation of their identity, customs, culture, and way of life – and determined their relationships with animals and plants. The section also describes their oral tradition myth about their arrival on the peninsula.

Myth of Origin 1 (The Great Flood and Human Creation)

The Mah Meri believe that human beings originated from the incestuous coupling of a pair of siblings. The last two survivors of the Great Deluge, they drifted afloat on a raft for days until they sighted a mountain surrounded by sea. On landing, they found no signs of human life or settlements. The siblings decided to separate and explore the land in search of other human beings. Seven years, seven months, and seven days later, they stumbled upon each other. Realizing that they had encircled a mountain only to meet again at the same spot, they acknowledged each other, procreated, and the land was gradually populated by their descendents (Che Yah & Julida Uju, pers. comm., February 12, 2009).19

The myth of the Great Flood or Deluge that annihilated humankind leaving two survivors to repopulate humanity is prevalent in many cultures, especially among Austroasiatic speakers in Southeast Asia. A consistent theme of the story is a great flood/deluge, a brother and sister, and the proliferation of various ethnic

19 In Nowak's (1987, 172) version, the two siblings are named Pagar Buyuh, the older sister and Busuh, the younger brother. The siblings produced two children, an elder sister and a younger brother who also married and reproduced.
groups. The speculation that the Mah Meri migrated into the peninsula from Mon-Khmer regions may have some validity, based on these stories.

Ethnographers and folklorists see in the deluge/creation myths of mainland Southeast Asia many original elements of an indigenous culture of great antiquity. According to many scholars, an autochthonous corpus of Southeast Asian tales originated among ethnic groups speaking Austroasiatic languages, with localized variations reflecting influences from neighboring cultures. (Dang Ngiem Van 1993: 304)

The act of incest in this origin myth was prohibited when the Mah Meri discovered the “Book of Conduct” with rules for human behavior, kept by Moyang Lanjut (a female ancestral spirit). From then on, incest was prohibited and denounced (Nowak 1987, 173). Adhering to adat (custom) resulted in the flowering of “culture,” a mark of civilization separating human beings from the animals and plants.

**Myth of Origin 2 (Arrival on Carey Island)**

The most recent tale of origin that was told to me was that of Sam Po Kong, who, in one of his voyages brought the Mah Meri from mainland Southeast Asia to Carey Island (Maznah Unyan pers. comm., February 20, 2009). Sam Po Kong is actually the local name for the famous Chinese Admiral Cheng Ho (Zheng He), who accompanied Princess Hang Li Po (betrothed to Sultan Mansur Shah) to Malacca during the fifteenth century. Although only a myth, the tale supports belief in Mah Meri origins in areas of south China, for Sam Po Kong is believed to have come from Yunnan, China (Suryadinata 2005).
Before the voyage, Sam Po Kong told the Mah Meri ancestors to keep their eyes shut until he gave instructions to open them. During the voyage, a storm broke out, thunder and lightning struck, and the ship rocked back and forth. Shuddering in fear, the Mah Meri opened their eyes. Suddenly, the waters abated and dry land emerged. But Sam Po Kong banished the Mah Meri from this land because they had disobeyed his orders. He provided them with seeds and hoes, leaving them as he continued his journey with his fleet. The ship in which the Mah Meri arrived was petrified into a hill, which is known as the sacred Jugra Hill, located on the mainland opposite Carey Island. Che Yah says that she saw the remains of an anchor on this hill when she rowed her pahuk (small boat) along the Langat River (Che Yah, pers. comm., 12 February 2009). This may have validity since Kuala Langat lies along the Straits of Malacca, the principal route where international trade and commercial traffic from India, China, and the Middle East passed through Southeast Asia.

Mound and boat burials discovered along Kelang and Langat River basins in Selangor dating from the last centuries BCE include indigenous iron and bronze socketed tools, beads and pottery from India, and cast bronze bells and kettle drums from Dong Son in northern Vietnam. (Andaya 2008, 50)

The myth of a ship transformed into a hill, the disobedience in keeping their eyes shut, and the origins of the Mah Meri from a northerly location are consistent details in the various tales told in other variations by Karim (1981) and Ayampillay

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20 The Mah Meri saw a supernatural being whom they named Moyang Keramat (moyang: ancestral spirit; keramat: sacred) at Jugra Hill. A pangar (altar) was built to propitiate Moyang Keramat as the guardian of Jugra Hill.
(1976). However, the existence of “Sam Po Kong” appears almost new.\(^\text{21}\) It may well be due to the recently established business partnership and relationship of trust for the Mah Meri who sell their harvests to Chinese middle-men.

Myth of Origin 3 (Trimbow Myth)

The trimbow is the name of another origin myth of the Mah Meri. It establishes Mah Meri status as the original inhabitants of the Peninsula and expounds on their history of fear and distrust for the Malays who stole their land and slave-raided their people. The myth traces the Mah Meri place of origin to Mecca and Medina (holy Muslim cities where Muslims travel to perform the haj). In the trimbow myth, the Mah Meri migrate from these two places to the Malay Peninsula instead. Nowak (2004, 5) suggests that the movement away from the holy cities is a rejection of the Muslim faith.

The trimbow myth also tells of the Mah Meri migration from the peninsula to Sumatra to escape the Malays. They met and lived with the Bataks; then they went to Johore, where they fought and lost battles at Ayer Tawar, Batu Pahat, Sungai Buluh and Tanjong Karang. They finally found victory during a final battle against the Malays at Rawang. In Rawang, the Mah Meri made a bet with the Bugis from Sumatra that “if a stone floated and a coconut husk sank,” it would be a sign that they should be left alone. The Mah Meri bomoh (shaman) called upon the aid of Mah

\(^{21}\) No previous scholars mentioned Sam Po Kong. The Chinese name may have recently been invented because of their close interactions with the Chinese. The Mah Meri tell tales of the local deities of their Chinese friends, such as Datok Kong. Perhaps these are ways oral traditions come to be perpetuated in myths.
Meri moyang (ancestral spirits), and miraculously the stone stayed afloat while the coconut husk sank. Fearing the supernatural powers of the moyang, the Bugis vowed not to invade the Mah Meri again. The trimbow myth reminds the Mah Meri younger generation to be independent and not to succumb to Malay domination and Islamization. It asserts the uniqueness of Mah Meri identity as a distinct separate ethnic group.

*Moyang (Ancestral Spirit)*

Moyang means “ancestral spirit.” There are three ways of understanding moyang. First, moyang refers to the spirits of Mah Meri dead ancestors believed to dwell in the supernatural world. Mah Meri believe their ancestors are constantly watching over them and appeal to them for protection and safety. They also request favors and the fulfillment of desires and invoke blessings from their moyang.

Second, moyang also refer to the spirits of plants and animals, benevolent or malevolent. The Mah Meri appeal to their moyang for assistance in times of sickness believed to be retribution for acts of tulah (curse). Third, moyang are also supernatural beings sighted in the forests and seas. These beings are often exalted into deities believed to be spirit guardians of territories (villages), for example Moyang Gadeng of Kampung Sungai Mata, and Moyang Amai of Kampung Sungai Salang.
Tulah and Kemali

The Mah Meri have their own ideology regarding the reciprocal relationship between humans and the supernatural world. The concepts of *tulah* and *kemali* express this relationship. According to Karim, *tulah* states that plants and animals have been cursed as food for humans. *Tulah* also refers to the “individual and group retribution for transgression associated with moral order” such as the breaching of codes of conduct between the elderly and the young, or between animals and plants. Causes of *tulah* may be incest, overharvesting, and intruding into the space of *moyang* (ancestral spirits). These behaviors may bring on natural calamities, such as *bah* (flood), *marau* (drought), or *puting beliong* (hurricanes) (Karim 1981, 32-66).

*Kemali* refers to a situation in which human beings place themselves in states of danger when they do not observe certain taboos and become vulnerable to spirit attacks. Gimlette and Thomson call it, “something which is tabooed.” Mah Meri hunting and foraging activities often place them in states of *kemali* (Gimlette and Thomson 1939, 156, 206). Paradoxically, although *tulah* states that plants and animals have been cursed as food sources for humans, *kemali* state that plants and animals are dangerous because they subject humans to spirit-attacks causing illness and injury.

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22 The concepts of *tulah* and *kemali* are similar to the *punan* concept of the Semai
Colonial Period (1824-1957)

Malacca was colonized by a succession of European powers: Portuguese (1511-1641), Dutch (1641-1824), and British (1824-1957), but the peninsula was only colonized under the British since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. During British colonialism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Orang Asli economic situation evolved to “tin and gold extraction, performing casual labor, producing food for mining communities, and working in pepper plantations and Malayu rice fields” (Andaya and Andaya 1982, 379). The nineteenth century saw the exploitation of land on a massive scale by the British colonialists to acquire raw resources for primary industries. Timber extraction, development of rubber and palm oil plantations resulted in destruction of the rainforests, as well as the livelihood and traditional territories of the Orang Asli.

Orang Asli Livelihood and Malayu Relations

Two factors account for the deterioration of the alliance between the Orang Asli and the Malays. First, the Orang Asli were reluctant to embrace Islam, the new religion that penetrated the Malacca Empire (1400-1511 C.E.) and was widely adopted by the Malayu. Second, the decline in demand for forest products decreased the importance of the Orang Asli to the Malayu. The Orang Asli refused to abandon their hunter-gatherer and swidden agriculture life style, and the Malayu began to see the Orang Asli as “primitive,” uncivilized, and heathen through the perspective of their new religion and its ideology. Therefore, a growing hostility began to emerge.
The shift in attitude was reflected in the growing scorn and contempt with which the Malayu began to treat the Orang Asli. Their way of life, dress, and even their physical bodies became objects of ridicule (Andaya 2008, 380).

During the last two centuries, there were traces of Mah Meri settlements in the southernmost states of Johore, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, and the northernmost state of Selangor (Logan 1847, Skeat 1896, Blagden 1917, Evans 1913, Nowak 2004). From the mid 1800s to the early 1900’s, most Mah Meri evacuated their settlements in Johore, Malacca and Negeri Sembilan for northerly regions in Selangor such as Bukit Bangkok, Koyn, Klanang (Matak Buah) and Telok Gunyek, the first inhabited village in Pulau Gobow (now known as Carey Island—Nowak 1987, 37). This was a period of unrest and struggle among feuding migrant groups such as the Malays and Bugis who came from Sumatra, the Rhio-Lingga archipelago, and the Celebes (Karim 1981, 16). From 1866 to 1874, civil war erupted between the Malay rulers, Raja Abdullah and Raja Mahdi, when Sultan Abdul Samad of Selangor gave power and authority to Raja Abdullah over Klang Valley. This may have driven the migration of the Mah Meri from the mainland to a more isolated abode on Carey Island.

There are many accounts of slave raiding mentioned in historical documents (Andaya and Andaya 1982: 161; Endicott 1983; Dentan 1997; Gianno 1997; Jumper 1997). Mah Meri settlements in the southern regions of the peninsula were constantly harassed, persecuted, and attacked by the technologically more advanced

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23 Mah Meri groups were found along Sungai Linggi in Sungai Ujong, in Negeri Sembilan (Logan 1847, 248), in Sebatu, Batu Gajah, Jasin District, Malacca (Blagden 1917, 180), in Labu, Negeri Sembilan, Bukit Bangkok, Morib, Klanang, Tanjong Dua Blas, Bandar-Jugra (Skeat 1896, 393), and in Bukit Bangkong, Kuala Langat in Selangor (Evans 1913, cited in Nowak 1987, 37).
Malay-Indonesian migrants (Cole 1945, 110 and Mills, LA 1925, 75-77, cited in Karim 1981, 16). In Selangor, Binua settlements were raided by Rawa slavers (Binua settlements could possibly refer to Mah Meri settlements, for Logan mentions that the Mah Meri were sometimes classified as Orang Binua (Logan 1847b, 248). The Rawa and Mandailing Malays from Sumatra captured the Mantras (Mintiras) from Negeri Sembilan and southwestern Pahang (Logan 1847a, Evans 1915, cited in Nowak 1987). The Mah Meri who lived in other coastal locations might also have been attacked and captured (Nowak 1987).

The British had criticized Sultan Abdul Samad of Selangor (1804-1898) for keeping slaves. To Westerners, slavery was a violation of human rights, but there were many rationales for slavery in Malay custom (Andaya and Andaya 1982, 161). Nowak (2004, 309) suggests a possibility that the Mah Meri would have been subjected to slavery because Sultan Abdul Samad's palace was on Jugra Hill, where Mah Meri anchored their boats for trade. It is also a sacred monument, a symbol of their origins. Batin Sidin Bujang said that the Mah Meri often gave gifts as humble rakyat (citizens) to the Sultan:

…during the time of Batin Limpa (second batin of Kampung Sungai Bumbun) the Mah Meri and Malays were very kamcing (cordial relationship). The Mah Meri would pay respects to the Sultan at Jugra Palace by bringing a panduk (deer) or burung puyuh (quail). (Sidin Bujang, pers. comm., February 14, 2009)
In the midst of the civil war mentioned, the peaceful and docile Mah Meri, people fled, preferring to avoid bloodshed. Moving northward, they found refuge and a home in the mangrove creeks and estuaries of Carey Island (Karim 1981, 16).

As Wilkinson states

The Besisi (Mah Meri) are a shy, unwarlike people who have accepted without resentment the wrongs inflicted on them by past generations of Malays. Ask any of them for his family history and you will often be told a harrowing tale of the cold-blooded murder of some parent or relative... From the days of Mudzafar Shah of Malacca, he has exploited and persecuted. (Wilkinson 1971, 18)

Mah Meri encounters with the Malay-Indonesian-speaking slave-raiders are illustrated in their storytelling traditions. The trimbow myth affirms that there was indeed hostility between the Mah Meri and the Malayu (due to the slave trade) (See Myth of Origin 3)
Mah Meri: Settlement on Carey Island, Selangor

In 1850, the Mah Meri began permanent settlement on Carey Island. Prior to the 1900s, this island, known as Teluk Gunjeng24 (Gunjeng Bay) was surrounded with lowland rainforest, thick mangrove forests, mudflat shores, and flowing rivers abundant with endemic flora and fauna. The Mah Meri economy was dually oriented then—they hunted and foraged both the land and sea. As hunters, gatherers, fishermen, shellfish collectors, paddy farmers and swidden cultivators, the Mah Meri practiced a livelihood of subsistence and dependency on nature. The rivers were the main mode of transport, and the Mah Meri roamed the island freely in their pahuk (boats).25

The first coconut plantation was developed on Carey Island in 1895. Tea and rubber plantations, owned by Golden Hope Plantation Berhad,26 followed soon after. In 1903, Sultan Abdul Samad of Selangor gave Valentine Carey,27 a British coffee planter from Sri Lanka, 15,000 acres of land. He was given five years to plant at least 3,750 acres. In response, Carey allegedly paid the village head (most probably, Batin Nantik) of Teluk Gunyek RM 30,000 for the village, for it was land already cleared and would facilitate the planting process. This displaced the Mah Meri villagers at

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24 Teluk Gunyek and Teluk Gunjeng appear to be used interchangeably. Teluk Gunjeng is the name for the island (renamed Carey Island)(Rahim 2007), while Teluk Gunyek is the first Mah Meri settlement in “Teluk Gunjeng.” Additionally, Nowak refers to the whole of Carey Island as Pulau Gobow (Nowak 1987).

25 They caught crustaceans including ketam (crabs), belangkas (horseshoe crabs, carcinoscorpius rotundicauda), ketam gadeng (mudlobsters, thalassina anomala) and udang (shrimps); and mollusks such as kepah (clams) and lukan (bivalve, polymesoda expansa).

26 British palm oil plantation owner

27 Carey Island was named after Valentine Carey.
Teluk Gunyek who then scattered about the island. This scattering resulted in the gradual formation of the five present villages on Carey Island today.

By the end of the twentieth century, 20,000 acres of Carey Island (35,000 acres) had been converted into plantation land.\(^\text{28}\) A total of 14,000 acres were conserved as forest reserve land, while the remaining 1,000 were gazetted as aboriginal reserve land. The five Mah Meri settlements, relatively separated from each other, share this reserve land (Nowak 2004; Rahim 2007, 14; Lai 2008, 2) (Figure 1.9).

**Orang Asli-British Relations**

Colonialism may take place through paternalism, whereby a dominant group believes its “progressive” approaches are for the betterment of the minorities believed to have “primitive” ways of livelihood. The next section explores how the British tried to administer the Orang Asli in the early 50s. Before the 1960s, the Orang Asli, as an ethnic category did not exist. They did not view themselves as a homogenous group (Nicholas 2000, 6). By constructing identities and categorizing the Orang Asli into ethnic divisions, the British began a practice of paternalism that extended into contemporary administration of the Orang Asli.

During World War II (1941-1945), the British cooperated with the Chinese communists, who formed the Malaysian Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) to fight the invading Japanese soldiers. Soon, the Japanese set out to “search and destroy” the

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\(^{28}\) Today (2010) Sime Darby Sdn Bhd and Yayasan Selangor (Selangor Foundation) have taken ownership of Golden Hope Plantation.
Chinese communists. The Orang Asli, sought by the Chinese for their knowledge of forest routes and food resources, were thought to keep the Chinese communists alive in their hidden jungle retreats. Traditionally non-violent and peaceful people, the Orang Asli were thrust into an unwanted war against an enemy with whom they had no conflicts, and with no knowledge of why they were waging a war (Means, 1985/86).

In the 1900s, the British (1824-1957) constructed three categories of Orang Asli: the Negritos (Semang), Senoi (Sakai), and Aboriginal Malay (Proto Malay),29 for the purpose of administration, control, surveillance and domination30 (Skeat and Blagden 1906), Schebesta (1973), Evans (1937), Cole (1945), Dentan et. al. 1997, Andaya 1982, Nicholas 2000, Gomes 2007). These categories were established based on physiognomy and linguistic and occupational orientation. The Negritos were traditional hunter-gathers; Senoi, hunter-gatherers and swidden cultivators; and the Proto Malays, sea and mangrove foragers, and sedentary agriculturalists. The Negritos and Senoi spoke an Austroasiatic language, while the Aboriginal Malays spoke an Austronesian one. The Orang Asli were fit into these

29 The earliest people to populate the Malay Peninsula were the Negritos and Senoi, believed to be descendents of the Australoid and Southern Mongoloids respectively.29 The traditional view is that Negritos have Australo-Melanesian affinities, and are probably the descendents of the Hoabinhian culture dating 10,000 years back. They reside in mountainous regions north of Pahang (Datan 1998, 46). The Senoi were more affiliated with the Neolithic Southern Mongoloid believed to have migrated from Thailand some 4,000 years ago (Bellwood 1998, 11). Benjamin (1976), Bulbeck, and Bellwood argue for an in situ evolution suggesting local adaptation rather than migration to account for the myriad groups found in the peninsula.29 The Malayo-Polynesian speakers, ancestors of the Proto Malays, first arrived in the Malay Peninsula during 1000 BCE (Andaya 2008, 213). Their suggested origin is somewhere in South China or possibly Taiwan. They migrated to Southeast Asia and Oceania through the Philippines and eastern Indonesia before reaching the Malay Peninsula, Western Borneo and Sumatra (Andaya 1982, 9). The Malays settled the coastal plains of the south, gradually pushing the Negritos and Senois inland as they began to populate the land.
30 This tripartite model saw early constructions in established categories by Skeat and Blagden (1906) and refined by Schebesta [1973 (1929)]
classifications by the Malaysian government, administered through the paternalistic care of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA).\textsuperscript{31} The Mah Meri speak an Austroasiatic language\textsuperscript{32} and are maritime and mangrove forest hunter-gatherers and sedentary agriculturalists. Therefore, they fall into both Senoi and Aboriginal Malay categories, but were placed in the Senoi category. This classification is a classic example of the discrepancies that arise in creating ethnic boundaries that compartmentalize people into fixed identities.\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.2.png}
\caption{Distribution of Orang Asli in peninsular Malaysia (Dentan, 1997)}
\end{figure}

\textbf{Note:} Btsisi’ = Mah Meri

\textsuperscript{31} The Orang Asli are under the administration of Jabatan Hal-Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA)—the majority of its staff are ethnic Malays.

\textsuperscript{32} The Negritos and Senoi speak a language, which has a distant relationship with Mon and Khmer, a subgroup of the Austroasiatic language family.

\textsuperscript{33} The Temoq group was dropped and subsumed into the Jakun group, in order to have six equal subgroups under the three main categories—neat and orderly ways of presenting information (Nicholas 2000, 14).
Independence (1957- present)

The question of indigeneity has roots in colonial imaginings and continues after colonialism. Through economic and political negotiations, rather than military action, the British expanded their powers into the peninsula. They strengthened the solidarity of several Malay rulers and marginalized the other communities, namely the aborigines (Orang Asli). The British conceived the peninsula as composed of many “races,” consequently creating the distinction between the Malays and the aborigines (Nah 2006, 286).

The Orang Asli’s Legal Position

During pre-Independence negotiations, the Malay rulers and elites fought for the preservation of the “special position” of the Malays prior to British intervention, positioning themselves as the rightful indigenous people of the peninsula. The Orang Asli, unaware of these negotiations, were left out of the discussion. Thus, although they were accorded *bumiputera* (*bumi*: earth, *putera*: sons) status, they were not given the special positions and privileges of the Malays and politically-defined natives of Sabah and Sarawak, nor the same Constitutional rights as other indigenous groups. Article 153 in the Constitution defines this special position:

It shall be the responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities in accordance with the provisions of this Article.
Bumiputera have preferential admission to government educational institutions, qualification for public scholarships, and access to positions in government, and ownership of businesses. A 30% representation in equity, business, and hiring is part of the NEP and should be followed by all (Andaya & Andaya, 1982). The NEP policy for Malays was intended as affirmative action. There has been abuse of the affirmative action, but the intention was a good one. The bumiputera policy was intended to defuse inter-ethnic tensions aroused by the May 13, 1969 racial riots. According to Hng, affirmative policies are based on a policy of discrimination, favoritism, cronyism, bias, arbitrariness, and waste. Nevertheless, since the policy was intended to be transitional, it was not openly interrogated. After almost forty years of implementation, a growing Malay class has emerged, Malay participation in share ownership has increased, and employment of Malays has also spread to all sectors of the economy (Hng 2004, 155-156). However, there are few signs that these affirmative policies will be abolished in the interest of equality, meritocracy, transparency, and accountability. Nicholas states:

I subscribe to the simple rule that fairness and justice should always prevail as the fundamental premise for any distribution of rights, resources and opportunities. This does not rule out exemptions or affirmative actions being taken for a category of people. It does insist however, that such departures should be based on the sole purpose of alleviating difficulties and for achieving the demands of justice (Nicholas 2004, 20).

According to the Malaysian Constitution, as citizens of Malaysia the Orang Asli are accorded freedom of religion and all rights and protections of citizens. However, due to their historical alliance with Communist insurgents, the Aboriginal Peoples Act remains in effect (Malaysian Government 1982). This act provides JHEOA with extraordinary control over information dissemination including the
determination of who can visit the Orang Asli and what they can read (Malaysian Government 1994; Dentan and Endicot 2006, 31). Orang Asli were designated as “squatters” on their land until 2002, for Malaysian land law did not entitle them to any land rights. Nearly 80 percent of Orang Asli villages have no legal rights to the land they have occupied, tilled and farmed for centuries (POASM 1991, 8). Although they have some security if their land is gazetted as “Orang Asli reserves,” only a total of 19,507 hectares out of 127,415 hectares of Orang Asli traditional land have been so designated. Orang Asli land amounts to far more than the land requested for gazetting by JHEOA (Yusof 1999). Even though land has been gazetted as Orang Asli reserve, the state government can revoke these land rights for their own benefit. According to Article 83 in the Constitution, the Federal Government has the power to acquire land from the state, which they do for building a dam, airport, golf course, or highway. Approximately 99.8% of Orang Asli do not have individual land titles; therefore they are not entitled to loans and assistance from banks or government agencies to improve their farming and planting (Endicott and Dentan 2006, 32).

In recent years, with the help of non-government associations, the Orang Asli have mobilized themselves to assert their rights. The formation of POASM (Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Association)34, a pan-Orang Asli association, and JOAS (Indigenous People’s Network of Malaysia) is a first step toward nurturing the needs, skills and rhetoric of the Orang Asli. Nicholas states, “the Orang Asli need to

34 Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (POASM) or Peninsular Malaysia Orang Asli Association
negotiate from a position of strength in order to assert their aspirations for autonomy and self-determination” (Nicholas 2000, 238).

**Orang Asli as Bumiputera**

In 1961, the JHEOA, under a new Malaysian administration, formulated new goals for the Orang Asli. The central goal was to integrate the Orang Asli into national communities by developing socio-economic programs so that the aboriginal communities would be able to “develop with other races and enjoy a better quality of living.” After Independence, fear of the Orang Asli as a security threat decreased, but their status as “original” inhabitants challenged the status of the Malays striving for majority status and sovereignty. The government devised a plan to classify the Orang Asli as * bumiputera*, or “sons of the soil,” which encompassed a wider concept of the indigenous ethnic minority and contributed to the *bumiputera* count.

The *bumiputera*, together with the Malays and indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, comprise almost 65.1 per cent of the national Malaysian population, the others being Chinese and Indians (Nicholas 2000, 1). *Bumiputera* status accords privileges and affirmative action unavailable to the other ethnic groups. Although Orang Asli are categorized as *bumiputera*, they do not receive the same privileges as


[36] Malay 50.4%, Chinese 23.7%, indigenous 11%, Indian 7.1%, others 7.8% (2004 est.), accessed 20 November 2009, [http://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/demographics_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/demographics_profile.html).
the Malays, who were accorded other ‘Malay special rights’. If indigeneity is defined by length of residence, the Orang Asli settled the Malay Peninsula long before the predecessors of the contemporary Malays (Gomes 2004). When the Orang Asli assert their rights, dominant groups attempt to reinterpret the notion of indigeneity. Malaysia’s first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman stated:

There is no doubt that the Malays were the indigenous peoples of this land because the original inhabitants did not have any form of civilization compared with the Malays . . . and instead lived like primitives in mountains and thick jungle. (cited in Nicholas 2000, 90)

Malaysia’s fourth Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohammad, brought in yet another paradigm:

Aborigines are found in Australia, Taiwan and Japan . . . but nowhere are they regarded as the definitive people of the country concerned. The definitive people are those who set up the first government. In Malaya, the Malays without doubt formed the first effective governments. The Orang Melayu or Malays have always been the definitive people of the Malay Peninsula. (Dentan et al. 1997, 21-22)

To eradicate the idea of the existence of an “earlier” people, a policy of assimilation and integration disguised in modernization schemes was introduced to absorb the Orang Asli into the mainstream population.

**Development and Modernization**

At present, the nation’s ultimate plan for the Orang Asli is one of assimilation and integration into the mainstream community. There are two reasons. First, the

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37 Such policies include quotas for the following: admission to government educational institutions, qualification for public scholarships, positions in government, and ownership of businesses. Public discussion of indigeneity and privileges is suppressed through the ‘Internal Security Act’ (ISA), which prohibits public gatherings attempting seditious or rebellious movements.
Orang Asli claims to indigeneity contest the ethno-nationalistic position of the Malays:

The powerful social construction of the Orang Asli as undeniably indigenous creates anxieties within the postcolonial Malay Self, which are expressed through efforts to assimilate the Orang Asli identity into Malay identity ostensibly in the quest for progress, development and modernization. (Nah, 2006, 287)

One of the most advantageous categories to be classified as is the Malay category. The Orang Asli have the choice to change their classification from the Orang Asli to Malay category. Article 160 in the Constitution defines Malay as:

A Malaysian citizen born to a Malaysian citizen, who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs, and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore. Malay citizens who convert out of Islam are no longer considered Malay under the law.

A number of Orang Asli have converted to Islam and identified with the Malay ethnic category; however, many still practice their traditional way of life. The Malaysian government is not as concerned with them as they are with their children. Once acculturated in Malay ways, these Orang Asli children will eventually be Malays. Conversion to Islam automatically absorbs Orang Asli into the “Malay” ethnic group. To be “Malay” is 1) to be Muslim, 2) to speak the Malay language, and 3) to practice Malay customs and culture. In 1990, then Director-General Jimin stated that he hoped the Orang Asli would fully integrate into Malaysian society, “preferably as an Islamized subgroup of the Malays” (Todd 1990, 11).

The ultimate vision of being a fully industrialized and developed nation motivates the elimination of any lifestyle perceived as primitive, backward, or unprogressive. To be developed means to practice a “civilized” religion, to consume
modern products, to be literate, and to flow with global trends. This contrasts greatly with Orang Asli values. Many Orang Asli reject efforts to integrate them as a denial of their human rights and lack of respect for their ancient worldview, religion, and customs predating the Malays in the peninsula. They resist and voice their rights to freedom and their own livelihood and lifestyle as indigenous people.

The assimilation process includes control through resettlement at accessible locations, reducing Orang Asli political autonomy, shifting their economies into market-oriented peasant economies, and providing lucrative rewards for conversion to Islam (Endicott and Dentan 2004). Development and modernization have gradually exposed the Orang Asli to the world of capitalism, consumerism, and materialism. Forced to seek wage work outside their settlements, there is a growing threat that the solidarity of ethnic groups and their distinct cultures and customs may be diluted over time, causing them to cease to exist as separate ethnic categories.

In line with Vision 2020, Tun Dr. Mathathir spearheaded the Bangsa Malaysia (bangsa: race) ideology, the “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), during the 80s. It sought the construction of a people united toward establishing a united Malaysian nation with a common sense of identity and shared destiny. Perpetuating the Bangsa Malaysia vision is the “1Malaysia” ideology, established by the current Prime Minister, Dr. Najib Razak, in 2009. The “1Malaysia” concept continues the Bangsa Malaysia legacy with transformation to a more inclusive policy, and more merit-based society of acceptance rather than tolerance. Prime Minister Dr. Najib Razak states, “The livelihood of the people must be based on moderation and
equality, with fair distribution of wealth so that fairness can be planned holistically without marginalizing any group from national development” (*The Star*, February 26, 2010).

Amidst all these ideologies, there lies a core *bumiputera* policy that makes the ideologies seem controversial. How can a united *Bangsa* Malaysia vision be achieved when *bumiputera* status and affirmative policies privileging specific ethnic groups are still at play? In effect, can this “imagined” multicultural society living in harmony exist while perpetuating a system based on ethnicized privileges? Ironically, the aim to construct a *Bangsa* Malaysia has created awareness of and questions regarding ethnicity. The Mah Meri begin to question who they are within this vision. What is their place among the mosaic of people around them?

**Orang Asli Political Awakening**

In 1976, the Orang Asli of Malaysia formed a pan-Orang Asli association known as Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (POASM) or “Orang Asli Association of Peninsular Malaysia” to provide a voice and to bring the plights and concerns of the Orang Asli to public attention. The Center of Orang Asli Concerns (COAC) was established to provide information and commentary on the Orang Asli through book publications, newspaper articles, online articles, and non-governmental assistance, and to advocate for Orang Asli issues and concerns.

Foreign organizations such as the Regional Network for Indigenous Peoples (RNIP),

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38 However, it is not surprising for Malaysia to create idealistic ideologies to inspire and invoke euphoria among the people without follow-up implementation, which is often disrupted by individual desires for power, control, chauvinism, cronyism, and corruption.
established to safeguard, protect and restore natural livelihood for the poverty alleviation of the indigenous peoples (IPs) in Southeast Asia, have provided the Orang Asli with support in active regional networks for knowledge exchange and capacity building, promotion and sustaining of their cultural identity; sustainable use of natural livelihood resources; income for local IPs from enhanced productive functions of these resources, and more.\textsuperscript{39} The Indigenous Peoples Networks of Malaysia or Jaringan Orang Asal Se-Malaysia (JOAS), an umbrella network for 21 community-based non-governmental associations, was recently established to advocate for indigenous rights and issues that provide the people with representation not just nationally, but regionally and internationally as well.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has encouraged the perpetuation of indigenous heritage and cultural sustainability through awards of excellence and prestige for Orang Asli handicrafts and woodcarvings.\textsuperscript{40} The United Nations Development Small Grants Program has facilitated the development of local environmental sustainability by assisting in developing a basic tourism infrastructure, training for guiding and other useful skills, and assisting in formation of a community organization to manage tourism.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} JOAS: Regional Network for Indigenous Peoples, accessed 26 July 2010. \url{http://rnip.net/}.
\textsuperscript{40} Semi Awas and Lejah Uju, both Mah Meri woodcarvers from Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island were awarded the UNESCO “Seal of Excellence” for their woodcarving in 2005. Abus Adik, a Temiar was given the award for the weaving of rattan bands, known as \textit{simpai}, in the same year (\textit{The Malay Mail}, 18 May 2005)
\textsuperscript{41} The GEF (Global Environment Facility) Small Grants Program (SGP) has been working with communities around the world to combat the most critical environmental problems and has successfully demonstrated that supporting communities in their efforts to achieve more sustainable livelihoods is not only possible, but extremely crucial. To date, GEF has assisted the Semelai people of Tasek Bera in establishing an association that promotes community-based ecotourism, accessed 26 July 2010, \url{http://sgp.undp.org/}.
With the increased support of local and international organizations, the Orang Asli have been gradually encouraged to stand up for their rights and resist the encroachment of developmental programs that destroy natural resources in their habitat, wiping out their traditional livelihood and extinguishing their culture and customs in the process.

**Derivation of Mah Meri name**

Before the British officially constructed Orang Asli categories, the Orang Asli identified themselves with their village and geographical location. Their identities changed as groups migrated, divided and separated, and adapted their customs, language, and livelihood over time. The following section shows the problems with classifying a people under a label.

Historical documents on the Mah Meri refer to them as Besisi (Skeat & Blagden 1906), `Btsisi (Nowak 1987), or Ma’ Betisek (Karim 1981). The term Mah Meri (**mah**: people; **meri**: forest) literally means “people of the forest.” There is controversy over this term, for it does not accurately represent the Mah Meri traditional livelihood as nomadic sea-mangrove hunter-gatherers. According to Ayampillay (1976, 2), “In addressing his people as the Mah Meri, the village headman of Kampung Tanjung Sepat in Kuala Langat district of Selangor was merely identifying his people with the larger aboriginal community. The Department of
Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA) officers interpreted it as the Batin’s reference to his people, thus designating the name “Mah Meri” as an official ethnic group.42

The Mah Meri are a unique group because they embody characteristics from both Senoi and Aboriginal Malay categories. Skeat and Blagden describe the Mah Meri:

The Besisi of Selangor and Malacca are most probably a mixed branch of the Sea-Jakun – in spite of the fact that the Besisi presents a close connection with the dialect of the Sakai. They have certainly some Semang (Negrito), and an admixture Senoi, but appear nevertheless to be largely Malayan. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 68)

Carey states that the Mah Meri speak Besisi, a branch of the Senoi and Mon-Khmer type of language, but their social structure and culture lean toward those of the Aboriginal Malay (Carey 1976, 166) Works from Logan (1850, 456-2) and Schmidt (1903, 339-45) show that the Mah Meri language has strong connections with the Senoi-Sakai dialects affiliated with the Mon-Khmer or Mon Annamese languages (Austroasiatic)(Karim 1981, 15-16). Benjamin’s (1976) approach in calculating the loan rates among the Negrito, Senoi and Aboriginal Malay languages suggests that the Mah Meri language belongs to an Aslian branch of Mon-Khmer within the Austroasiatic family. He classifies it as a Southern Aslian language, along with Semelai, Semoq Beri and Temoq. Kruspe (2009, 240) states that the Mah Meri

42 Some research scholars prefer to use the term Besisi or Besese (Skeat 1896; Blagden 1917; Evans 1915a, 1923, Williams-Hunt 1952, Ayampillay 1976) or B’tsisi (Nowak 1987) because of its semblance to the Malay word, bersisik (has scales) or sisi (side). There are a few possible explanations for the origins of these words. The first, bersisik, which means ‘has scales,’ derives from the Mah Meri’s occupation as fishermen and sea nomads. A comical story exists about the origins of this title. Two Mah Meri men were scaling fish when a fish scale flew up and lodged in one of the men’s eye. As he gazed toward the sea, he thought he saw pirate ships sailing toward them. He jumped up, frantically shouting, “Pirates! Pirates!” (Karim 1981, 14; Rahim 2007, 2).
language, which may have as many as 2,185 speakers, has no written tradition and is highly endangered.

Today, although their language reveals some affiliation with the Senoi dialect, there are no traces of Mah Meri communities north of Selangor. Karim (1981, 17) suggests Mah Meri may have occupied a more northerly position and lived in close proximity with southern Senoi groups in the states of Pahang and Negeri Sembilan prior to their current location in the Southwest of the Peninsula. Although in situ development has been argued for, Benjamin’s (1976) theory that a Neolithic agricultural community of Austroasiatic speakers from central Thailand to Peninsula as far south as Selangor may explain the presence of this group in Selangor. Interestingly, although Malay, Chinese, and Indian early settlements geographically separate them from the other Senoi groups in the north and central Peninsula, the Mah Meri are still able to maintain a distinct Besisi language.

Today (2010), many Mah Meri words have been replaced by Malay words and enhanced with new Chinese words not in their vocabulary.\(^43\) Yahya Sidin expresses his frustration when encountering older Mah Meri words rarely used today:

> Our language is gradually disappearing; only certain people are concerned and aware. Many of the elderly people, they did not care to preserve the old words; now, we young people, would like to learn but don’t even know how. (Yahya Sidin, pers. comm., 14 July 2009)

\(^{43}\) Examples of Malay words replacing Mah Meri words are *basuh* (wash) for *lusah*, and *gajah* (elephant) for *merat*. Chinese words unavailable in Mah Meri language, such as *hiong* for joss stick and *ong* for prosperous have also been incorporated into their language (Titah anak Tebung, pers. comm., 16 April 2009, and Yahya Sidin, pers. comm., 14 July 2009).
Kampung Sungai Bumbun: The 20th century

During the mid-twentieth century, many Mah Meri migrated to Carey Island from the peninsula and, by 1950, there were about one thousand there (Rahim 2007, 4). Batin Sidin anak Bujang, the fourth and present (2009) batin (headman) of Kampung Sungai Bumbun, said that the first batin was Batin Nantik, who established a village at Teluk Gunyek before the land was sold (Skeat 1906, 146). According to Batin Sidin Bujang (the fourth village head), Batin Nantik came from Jugra on the peninsula in the mid-nineteenth century. The second batin, known as Batin Limpa, was said to have fled the peninsula for the safety of his daughters. It was during this period that the village disintegrated and some moved to Kampung Sungai Bumbun. Batin Sidin Bujang says,

I am not sure exactly why Batin Nantik came to Carey Island, but I believe he feared the Malays and Chinese on the peninsula. There are also stories about Batin Limpa who fled to Carey Island in order to protect his three daughters from the slave trade (Sidin Bujang pers. comm., 16 July 2009)

Batin Sidin Bujang attests that his grandfather fled with his father from the mainland during the Japanese occupation in Malaya (1942-1945). His grandfather was Bugis, while his grandmother was Minangkabau. They found peace among the Mah Meri on Carey Island, and therefore they made it their permanent home. Batin Sidin Bujang says that his grandparents spoke to him in Malay.

My grandfather is from Batu Pahat Johore. I am not sure exactly when but it was either during World War I or II that he sailed on a sampan (boat) or rakit (raft) from Johoree to Carey Island. When he reached Carey Island, he was assured of safety and did not migrate anymore. (ibid.)

This statement affirms that the Mah Meri themselves are not from a “pure” stock, and that inter-mingling was not uncommon in the past. Therefore, although
Batin Sidin’s is not of Mah Meri ancestry, he is integrated into the Mah Meri identity over time. This information also proves that identity is fluid and flexible, it changes as humans adapt to different cultures through migration and settlement. It also suggests that the images painted of Bugis and Minangkabau as invaders and slave traders were limited to certain groups.

Encroachment of Territory

Kampung Sungai Bumbun is composed of three smaller riverine hamlets: Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Kampung Sungai Mata, and Kampung Sungai Salang. This village is 346 acres in size and there are 83 families – a total of 400 people living in the village. Kampung Sungai Bumbun land belongs to the state of Selangor, unlike Kampung Sungai Judah, Rambai, and Kepau Laut where the residents have land titles in their village. Although it is government land, the Mah Meri are given freedom to plant and sell the fruits of their harvests. Batin Sidin Bujang has been petitioning for their land to be gazetted as Mah Meri land. He argues, “I asked why our land does not belong to us when we were here long before Carey Island (referring to the name) existed.” (Sidin Bujang, pers. comm., February 14, 2009)

The Bumbun people are worried that the government will resettle them and use their space to develop more palm oil plantations.

In the 1990s, the last mangrove area behind Kampung Sungai Bumbun was reclaimed from the sea, resulting in the village becoming landlocked. The Mata,

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44 Bumbun or Bumbod in the Mah Meri language refers to a hide used to trap birds (Rahim 2007, 9). These three sub-villages are named after the river that transported its people out to sea.
45 Batin Sidin is referring to the time when Carey Island was still a bay given the name Teluk Gunjeng by the Mah Meri themselves.
Bumbun, and Salang Rivers, which transported the Mah Meri from the village to the sea and to the peninsula, have almost completely dried up. Ever since the building of bunds (embankment) in 1985, seawater could not flow into the mangrove forests behind their village. Batin Sidin Bujang says,

> When *Yayasan Selangor* (Selangor Foundation) built the bunds, our villagers lost our occupation as fishermen and crab gatherers. The rivers were all closed. Today, there is one hundred per cent no more fishermen in our village. (ibid.)

The natural mangrove ecology of Carey Island has been destroyed and the subsistence livelihood of the Mah Meri hampered. Bunds prohibit the natural flow of water into mangrove forests during high tide, and prevent crabs, shrimps, horseshoe crabs and mud lobsters from swimming into the mangrove to lay eggs during seasonal periods.

**Livelihood and Life Style**

The Mah Meri have constantly adapted their livelihood for survival. Julida Uju says, “we will never stoop as low as to beg on the streets. One of our strengths is our ability to survive (Julida Uju, pers. comm., February 12, 2009). No matter the ordeals, we find ways to live.” During the 1850s, the Mah Meri began building permanent settlements and practicing swidden agriculture. Rice was planted in August and September and harvested in March. While waiting for the harvest, the Mah Meri planted yams and potatoes in their gardens for staple food. Fruit trees such as banana, durian, mango, breadfruit, jackfruit and others were planted. From November to February, the Mah Meri gathered crabs from the shore and mudflats to sell to a Chinese *towkay* (businessman). They rowed their boats to Pulau Ketam
nearby to gather crabs during the day and took shelter in temporary sheds at night.  

The Mah Meri did not depend on one source of income but practiced different livelihood strategies, depending on what was available. They enjoyed freedom, flexibility, and independence, and adapted to the changing seasons. They moved where the crabs would be plentiful at Pulau Ketam, leaving their paddy to grow during this period, and they returned after the rainy season to cultivate and harvest the paddy.

Figure 2.3.  Coconut, banana, areca nut trees and cassava plants in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

46 Mah Meri women carried their babies in a batik sling while gathering crabs at the mudflats. Crab gathering was a skill. They had to be hooked out from mud holes without breaking their claws. Treading on muddy shores avoiding sharp mangrove roots was difficult and tedious (pers. comm., Che Yah 12 February 2009; Lai 2008, 22)
Besides swidden agriculture and crab gathering, the Mah Meri men felled *nibong* trees and floated them to the peninsula to sell. Trunks were used for floors of houses and frames that held the structure. Women wove *attap* roofs from nipa palm leaves. They also made ropes from processed bamboo and made *sapu lidi* (stick brooms) from discarded palm oil fronds.  

*Kampung Sungai Bumbun: Early 21st Century*

While most Mah Meri in Kampung Sungai Bumbun remain animist in their religion (85%), some have adopted Islam (8%), and others Christianity (2%)(JHEOA Kuala Langat, 2009). In the 1980s, water was piped into the village, and in 2003, twenty-four hour electricity was available. A long tarred road that cut across all three sub-villages changed the traditional layout of the village, where houses had been built alongside the Mata, Bumbun, or Salang River. There is now also a kindergarten, a primary school, a multi-purpose hall, and a small clinic. Other aid from the government includes eleven woodcarving sheds and a few weaving sheds. The Pusat Kraf (Craft Center) was built in 2009 to centralize the workforce in a single place.  

Today (2009) there is no market for *attap* roofs and *nibong* trunks but women still make *sapu lidi* to sell to the Chinese *towkay* at RM0.50 per stick. The Mah Meri still like to work in their open air sheds, which are cool and shady. They do not like to work centrally in the “cold” building.
Woodcarving

Woodcarving of *patung* (sculptures) and *topeng* (face-masks) as commodities is an expansion of the art of carving small human, animal, and plant figurines for Mah Meri healing traditions. After Batin Matahari (*batin*: village head), the third village head passed away, Mah Meri traditional healing rituals almost disappeared (Sidin Bujang, pers. comm., February 14, 2009).

In the older days, we carved figures and facemasks from *pulai* wood using shells or sharpened bamboo. Visitors were amazed that we could carve wood without using steel. These figures are used in healing ceremonies for the *tukar ganti* (exchange) ritual. The Mah Meri try to convince the malevolent spirit to return the patient’s soul by offering him beautiful hand-carved figurines as an exchange (Pion Bumbung, pers. comm., 5th April 2009)

In the mid-twentieth century, the late local artist Hoessein Enas, a renowned portrait painter and then Assistant Protector of Aborigines in Selangor, noticed the hundreds of miniature wooden figurines carved by the Mah Meri for their healing ceremonies. He encouraged three Mah Meri woodcarvers, namely Ahmad Kassim, Singan Muntil and Ligam, Pion Bumbung, from Kampung Sungai Bumbun, to carve larger sculptures for sale, tailoring them for tourist or visitor consumption and consequently creating a sustainable means of maintaining their culture (Rahim 2007, 27-29).

Tourists were attracted to the masks worn by the dancers, originally made from *pulai* wood. The tourists asked to buy their masks, but the Mah Meri were reluctant to sell them because the masks for the Main Jo’oh were sacred. Following

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49 Roland Werner (1986) has documented and illustrated in photos the numerous miniature wooden figurines used for their healing ceremonies in his book titled *Bomoh-poyang*: traditional medicine and ceremonial art of the aborigines of Malaysia
the late Hoessein’s advice, the Mah Meri began to create new designs to illustrate their imagination of the various *moyang* in their large pantheon of ancestral spirits. Larger wooden sculptures and facemasks were made for collectors and enthusiasts from all over the world. Later, when *pulai* wood became scarce due to deforestation, the Mah Meri replaced it with *nyireh batu* or *nyireh bunga*, wood from mangrove trees. But these resources are also being depleted.

![Image of Wazir Jahan Karim and Pion Bumbung](image)

Figure 2.4. Wazir Jahan Karim (anthropologist) with Pion Bumbung (holding his carving of the mask of Moyang Melur). (photo by Karim, 1970s)

Weaving

Alarmed at the decline in weaving skills, Gendoi Samah Saman attempted to revive this art with her daughters during the early millennium. In 2003, Maznah Unyan, Gendoi Samah’s daughter led the group in weaving traditional *bujam*

50 *Gendoi* means grandmother and is a term of respect for elderly Mah Meri women.
(pouches for tobacco and matches), mats, and "crab-gathering baskets." The art of weaving was rejuvenated with the formation of Tompok Topoh. Tompok Topoh is comprised of Mah Meri women from Bumbun village who work together to weave and sell Mah Meri handicrafts. Assisted by non-government associations such as Gerai OA (Orang Asli shop), COAC (Center of Orang Asli Concerns), Elevyn and other organizations concerned with the welfare of the Mah Meri, the group has managed to market their products without the middlemen.

Note: Clockwise from rear: Julida Uju, Rosiah Kengkeng, Salmiah, unknown, Pinta Unyan and Junaidah.

Figure 2.5. Tompok Topoh women weaving nipa palm. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

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51 Traditionally, weaving mats was a necessary skill for a bride-to-be. She had to weave mats for her wedding; this proved her readiness to be a homemaker.
Small Holdings and Wage Labor

The clearing of lowland rainforest and nearby mangrove forests, the building of bunds, the clogging and drying out of rivers, and pollution of well water from chemical fertilizers have altered the natural ecology of Carey Island and have forced the Mah Meri into different livelihoods. Batin Sidin Bujang relates:

Before the 80s, we often went out to sea, but when bunds were built, besides work at the plantations our occupation became our own tanaman (plants) and our own kebun (garden) (Sidin Bujang, pers. comm., Feb 14, 2009)

Today, the Mah Meri earn their major income from oil palm trees planted on their land in Bumbun village. Fruit is harvested twice a month and RM 600 can be earned for one harvest. Villagers also gather fallen coconuts and ripe bananas from their gardens, which the Chinese towkay buys daily for cash. The Mah Meri no longer plant rice and seldom plant vegetables in their gardens. Monkeys constantly disturb and eat the flowers from fruit trees, and porcupines also destroy the newly replanted pandanus seedlings.

Some Mah Meri men work in the oil palm plantations owned by Sime Darby and Yayasan Selangor (Selangor Foundation), clearing weeds, cutting palm fronds, plucking and gathering fruit. However, this is not a popular job due to the low pay. Some Mah Meri men work in factories in Klang, but the cost of transportation and meals discourages them from continuing these jobs. Some women work in seafood restaurants washing plates or taking orders.

Most Mah Meri children attend primary school (Sekolah Rendah Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island) in their village and secondary school (Sekolah Menengah Pulau Carey) at the Indian estate nearby. They study and take the same
examinations as at other government schools in the country. One of the dancers of the Main Jo’oh musical troupe, Diana Uju, in her 20s, is doing a diploma in Business Administration at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. It is inevitable that the next generation of Mah Meri will take jobs outside their village.

Figure 2.6. Vegetables bought from local Indian vendor. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

The villagers can no longer depend on subsistence living for survival. The women buy vegetables and fish from the local Indian vegetable vendor who comes by in his lorry daily. Sometimes they buy canned food, rice, fish, and vegetables from the Indian sundry shop located on the main road. Their traditional diet of natural resources has shifted to a diet of processed food from the market economy. The tradition of grilling seafood over a fire has also been replaced by frying in oil. The changes of diet and livelihood have brought debilitating diseases, and today many middle-aged Mah Meri suffer from stroke, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Although there is more to consume, the quality of food is much worse than their
traditional diet. Development and modernization have inevitably introduced the Mah Meri to the disadvantages of a capitalistic and consumer society.

**Summary**

During the pre-colonial years, Mah Meri livelihood and life style were relatively free from control or manipulation by dominant groups. This situation changed with the entry of British colonials and the nation-state era. As the number of oil palm plantations increased, Mah Meri livelihood and life style were affected. From being nomadic sea and mangrove people, practicing swidden agriculture, they now had to seek wage labor and practice sedentary agriculture.

Mah Meri identity, culture, customs, and worldviews became more defined because the modern nation-state required administration, control, and surveillance. The objectification of their ethnicity subjected them to various paternalistic policies of the government whose objective was to assimilate and integrate them into the mainstream community, although masked as modernization. The next chapters discuss how the Mah Meri respond to this hegemony through the Main Jo’oh, their music and dance performances.
Chapter 3

THE MUSICAL LIFE OF THE MAH MERI OF KAMPUNG SUNGAI BUMBUN: EARLY 1900s, LATE 1900s, AND EARLY 2000s

This chapter traces the evolution of Mah Meri musical life, musical culture, and musical instruments of the early 1900s, late 1900s, and early 2000s. In order to trace what is indigenous, acculturated, or modified in Mah Meri music, I draw from historical literature on the travels, migrations, and distribution of Mah Meri in the peninsula, associating their musical production with a wider Southeast Asian sound. The second period is based on interviews with Mah Meri villagers describing their musical life in the late 1900s. I report on the third period from my personal ethnographic fieldwork experience in 2009. An examination of the musical life, musical instruments, and music of the Mah Meri sheds light on how the Mah Meri have adapted the Main Jo’oh to different socio-political and ecological conditions. I identify continuity and change through the retainment, elimination, or innovation of musical instruments and musical practices in society. The degree of change in the Main Jo’oh results from Mah Meri negotiation with external variables, including national policies of development and assimilation, and a burgeoning tourism industry encroaching upon their cultural traditions.

Some questions considered in the chapter include: 1) How has Mah Meri identity as Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) speakers, categorized under the Senoi
classification (yet living a more Proto Malay lifestyle), affected their musical traditions? 2) How has the last century of gradual transition from nomadic hunter-gatherers and fishermen to the sedentary cultivation of rice and fruit, and then to wage labor affected their musical traditions? 3) How has interaction with other cultures through the commercial trade of forest goods through the Straits of Malacca influenced their performing traditions?

The Contemporary Context of the Main Jo’oh Musical Ensemble in Southeast Asia

The Main Jo’oh musical ensemble of the Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun in 2009 consists of the jule (violin), banjeng (bamboo-tube zither), tungtung (bamboo-tube stampers), tambo (double headed drum) and tawak (gong). Earlier instruments, which have declined in use today, were bamboo flutes and the jew's harp (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., April 21, 2009). The instruments of the ensemble are presumably from various geographical areas and were incorporated into the ensemble during different periods. Instruments that establish the Mah Meri’s theorized origins as Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer) speakers with connection to northern mainland indigenous Southeast Asia are the tungtung (bamboo-tube stampers) and ginggong (wooden xylophone). Taking material culture as evidence of indigeneity, the tungtung and ginggong have associations with the musical instruments still used among tribal communities such as Zuang-Tai in Yunnan, South China (Yuan and Mao 1986), Kalinga, Tingguan, Isneg, Ibaloi, Kankan-ey, and Ifugao in Northern Luzon (Nicolas, A. 1989) and Maguindanao and Tiruray in
Mindanao (Maceda 1964), as well as communities in Borneo, Sulawesi, Java, Bali, Sumatera, and Nussa Tenggara (Kunst 1968). Bamboo and wood are the most common materials used for instruments in Southeast Asia (Matusky 1998).

Skeat and Blagden (1906, 118) state that various musical instruments made from bamboo and wood exist among all the Orang Asli groups, but that the drum and *banjeng* are rarely found among Negrito groups.

It is curious that all the regular instruments except the drum are made of bamboo in some shape or form. Of these the distribution appears to be fairly general, with the possible exception the drum and the *banjeng*, which seem to be rarely used among the Semang (Negrito) tribes. They at least belong to a rather more developed class of instruments, found everywhere among the tribes of the Malayan stock. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 117)

Cole (1945) suggests that the drum is generally not seen among the “pygmies” (Negritos) of the Andaman Islands, possibly because it adds an extra weight for the nomadic Negritos on the move. When it does appear among the Negritos, Skeat and Blagden posit that it may have derived from Malayan (Malay-Indonesian) tribes. The music of these tribes appears to have in common with China, Indo-China, and, at least, formerly Java, a basic use of five tones, often represented as C D E G A, except where modified by foreign influence (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 118).

Therefore, the *tambo* (drum) and *banjeng* may have more affiliation with Malayan groups that arrived from Indonesia to settle in the peninsula. The word “*tambo*” derives from the Spanish word for drum, *tambor*. Photo illustrations found in Skeat and Blagden show that the *tambo* resembles the Balinese *kendang* (Photo 3.1, no.4). In Werner (1986), the *tambo* is seen in photos of miniature woodcarvings of a musician with a *tambo* strapped around his neck. The *tambo* used by the
present Main Jo’oh troupe is much shorter in length and resembles the *katindiek*, the
drum used to accompany the *randai* ensemble. The *randai* is a performing tradition
of the Minangkabau who now live in Negeri Sembilan.

Note: Pagan Bamboo “guitar” or “keranting,” from Kuala Sam, Kelantan River. 2. A
Semang nose-flute (Siong, Kedah) 3. Besisi bamboo “guitar” or “keranting,” 4. Besisi
jew’s harp, with rib-bone 5. Besisi Drum of Screw pine trunk, brace with rattan and
headed with mouse deer skin.

Figure 3.1. Besisi and Semang music instruments (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 117)

Figure 3.2. Figurines of musicians with a violin and drum carved from *pulai* wood
by the Mah Meri for healing ceremonies (Werner 1986, 10)
The *tawak* (gong) is a bronze knobbed gong struck with a wooden mallet. It is believed to have been brought to the peninsula through Indonesia. Bronze making was known in early Southeast Asia, as is evidenced in Hoabinhian sites found in present day North Vietnam and northeast Thailand and dating back to 3,000 B.C. (Miller and Williams 1998). Bronze gongs and gong-chimes, ubiquitous in Java today, are theorized to have arrived in island southeast Asia from mainland Asia during the third and second century B.C., the time of the Dong Son culture (Roseman 1998).

I suggest that the *tambo* and *tawak* were not common among the Mah Meri until they settled into a sedentary agricultural lifestyle. Prior to this, their nomadic lifestyle as fishermen who lived in boats and returned to mangrove creeks at night for shelter (Karim 1981) as did the need to remain hidden from attacks of predatory animals or avoid being caught during the period of slavery in the 17th and 18th century, would not have accommodated the lack of portability of the *tambo* and *tawak*. Therefore, these instruments may have been introduced only when the Mah Meri settled into Kampung Sungai Bumbun around 1850.

*Jule* (violin) is the Mah Meri name for the Western violin of Portuguese origins (Tan and Matusky 2004). According to Batin Sidin Bujang, the *jule* is a recent introduction to the Main Jo’oh ensemble. I suggest that the Mah Meri replaced the Malay word “*biola*” for violin with “*jule*” as a conscious move to differentiate their tradition from the Malay. Skeat and Blagden (1906) did not mention the *jule*, but Karim (1981) and Nowak (1987) already noted its prominence in Main Jo’oh music.
The Mah Meri is one group that has incorporated and indigenized the *jule* to their own local music aesthetic.

Although the Orang Asli and Malays have a long history of interaction as allies in the international forest trade, and as subjects of the Sultans, those living near lowland court and central trading areas,\(^{52}\) such as the Mah Meri, have a closer interaction with the Malay sultanate and multi-cultural environment (the Senois and Negritos were relatively isolated from the lowland court, colonial, and national cultures before 1940)(Roseman 1998). This interaction provides some explanation to the similarities between the Mah Meri and Malay musical ensembles.

The Main Jo’oh musical ensemble resembles the *ronggeng* ensemble, a Malay popular social dance ensemble believed to have originated during Portuguese contact. In 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) century, the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and *Tuhfat Al Nafis*\(^{53}\) two ancient Malay texts, mention a type of ronggeng ensemble consisting of the *kecapi* (a spiked fiddle),\(^{54}\) *rebana* (framed drum), and gong. The violin, introduced by the Portuguese in the 16\(^{th}\) century, replaced the *kecapi*, while the accordion (also brought by the Portuguese) was also added to the ensemble. The violin was a popular instrument among the Malays and Orang Asli, such as the Jakun and Semai.

\(^{52}\) A large proportion of the common or local people in Malacca were Orang Asli. Many of these Orang Asli groups have been renamed or absorbed into the Malay population. In the Sejarah Melayu, they were known as *hamba Melayu*, the “subjects of the Melayu.” The Orang Laut (Hang Tuah being one of them) was the most loyal servant of the Malaccan Sultan. There is mention of Hang Tuah being accepted as the leader of the Orang Biduanda (now known as Temuan) after fleeing the Sultan’s rage (Andaya 1982, 49).

\(^{53}\) Hikayat Hang Tuah may have possibly begun in the 15\(^{th}\) century, but the text itself dates from about 1700. The *Tuhfat al-Nafis* dates from the late 19\(^{th}\) century (Andaya, pers. comm. October 20, 2010).

\(^{54}\) A type of plucked chordophone resembling the Malaysian *rebab*. 
living closer to urban areas (Figure 3.4). The *jule* was adapted to the music of these groups.

Figure 3.3. A Jakun orchestra in Ulu Batu, Selangor. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 145)

Figure 3.4. The presence of the violin among the Orang Asli of Charau, Malacca. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 170)
In the early twentieth century, ronggeng ensembles appeared in Bangsawan or Malay opera, and in the 1930s and 40s, it was found in entertainment parks in urban areas of Malaya. Men bought tickets to “joget” with female ronggeng dancers (Tan and Matusky 2004, 321). Today, this ronggeng ensemble performs to Malay joget, Inang, Asli or Zapin dances. A comparison of the melodic patterns utilized by the Mah Meri to those of the Malay ronggeng shows how the musical styles are similar yet differ from each other. A detailed analysis of Main Jo’oh music will be provided in Chapter 5. The next section discusses the development of Mah Meri music, which is important to understanding contemporary Mah Meri music.

Musical Life: Early 1900s

The feast then begins, the freshly-brewed liquor is drunk, and, to the accompaniment of strains of their rude and incondite music, the jungle-folk of both sexes deck themselves freely with flowers and fragrant leaves and indulge in dancing and singing throughout the night. This ceremony is called the “Berentak Balei” or “Drumming upon (the floor) of the Tribal Hall” (Skeat and Blagden, 1906, 144-145).

The earliest description of a musical scene in a Mah Meri village is a festival of drinking and feasting at the balai (open-air shed) known as the Berentak Balei. These feasts were held during the various stages of paddy growth. In Southeast Asia, songs and rituals were associated with various stages of agriculture, seasonal rituals, and festivals. The themes of courtship and song debates pervade Southeast Asian musical traditions (Miller and Williams 1998). The shamans burned kemian

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55 joget can be used as an verb, meaning, “to dance.”
(benzoin)\textsuperscript{56} and chanted to propitiate the ancestors of the tribe and spirits of wild beasts and demons, such as the elephant, deer and wild pig,\textsuperscript{57} and the insect pests that attack their crops. The sacred mode then shifted to a secular atmosphere when music and singing began. Men and women joined in to feast, drink and dance. Skeat notes that songs were not only chanted, but also often acted. The dancer wore a special headdress and held a carved dance-wand. Men and women were drawn to the dance floor by the lilting rhythm and hypnotic repetition of the time-marking gong. Music and dancing continued until early morning. Some became intoxicated from the fermented liquor brewed from seasonal jungle fruits. These feasts often ended with “drinking bouts” wherein agreement for “wife exchanges” (Skeat and Blagden, 1906, 145).

... these banquets used to formerly conclude with a drinking bout, which was followed by a kind of “game,” at which the men of the tribe were traditionally allowed, if they pleased, to exchange their wives. All performances of this kind are now, however, of very rare occurrence, though there is no doubt as to the earlier prevalence of the custom. (ibid.)

**Musical Instruments**

In the early 1900s, Skeat and Blagden describe the existence of a drum, which they designate as the most important instrument as it was found in the houses of tribal chiefs, doubtlessly indicating their high office. The drum has not retained this status and is known as the *tambo* today. Skeat and Blagden also described a bamboo “guitar” called the *keranting*, which they believe was named

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\textsuperscript{56} Benzoin, a type of resin
\textsuperscript{57} Skeat and Blagden (1906, 144, fn 3)
after a stick insect (Skeat and Blagden, 1906, 142). Today, the *keranting* is known as the *banjeng* (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., April 21, 2009).

During the *Berentak Balei*, celebration in the early 1900s, Skeat and Blagden described six performers stamping pairs of bamboo tubes, *ding tengkhing* (quarrelling bamboos), which produced sounds of varying pitches. The bamboos were described as open at the top and cut off just below the node at the bottom. The player held these tubes vertically and stamped them lightly with the lower end on the ground or upon a hard piece of wood. Skeat and Blagden suggest that a higher-pitched bamboo is held in the right hand and a lower-pitched one in the left (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 140-141). The two biggest tubes with the “deepest” notes, were *lemol* (male) or *kuyn* (father); the two intermediate ones were *kedol* (female) or *gende* (mother); and the two smallest were *kenon* (child) or *kentot* (grandchild). The rhythm produced by these players is described as “common time”—one high pitch followed by three lower pitches.

The performers, holding one of the tubes in each hand, struck them in rapid succession upon the central floor beam of the house, producing a simple musical rhythm, which was distinctly harmonious. One of the tunes played by the Besisi consisted of one high note (struck with the right hand) followed by three low notes (struck by the left hand) in common time, the first note being the loudest. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 141)

**Musical Life: Late 1900s**

Beginning in the 1970s, the anthropological research of Karim (1981), Nowak (1987), and Werner (1997) showed that the Main Jo’oh was still a lively ritual performed during weddings and sacred ceremonies, such as ‘*Ari Moyang*’ (Ancestral Day). Nowak (2004) documents the earliest transitions of the Main Jo’oh
from a ritual enactment to staged entertainment. She suggests that the Mah Meri female dancers’ circular movement around the busut (mound) re-enacts their myth of origins, and therefore that the Main Jo’oh asserts their identity as original inhabitants of the land. The next section illustrates the ethos of a village before the building of the bridge that connects Carey Island to the peninsula in 1985. This connection encouraged an influx of modernization schemes into the village.

**Musicians and Singers**

My interviewees reminisced about the good old days of beautiful jo’oh and joget music, and admired several late musicians for their remarkable talents. These musicians were Ahmad Kassim and his wife, Mijah Sakit,\(^{58}\) from Kampung Sungai Salang opoh\(^{59}\) (extended family), well known as violinist and singer/banjeng player, respectively. The late Unyan Awas and his wife, Gendoi\(^{60}\) Samah Seman (now in her 80s), from Kampung Sungai Mata opoh were also a famous violinist and singer/banjeng player couple. Gendoi Embut Jantan, in her 80s now, remembers the festive celebrations with jo’oh music at the balai.

In the past, Mijah was the one who sang and recited poems. Gendoi (grandmother, Embut referring to herself) was not good at composing poems, gendoi played the tungtung only. There was also the tawak (gong), jule (violin) and tambo (double-headed drum. (Embut Jantan, pers. comm., April 20, 2009)

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\(^{58}\) Ahmad Kassim and Mijah Sakit had only child, Jamadiah Kassim, who did not perpetuate his parent’s heritage. Their two foster children, Jamilah Kassim and Johan Kassim, did not show interest either. Therefore, the Ahmad and Mijah’s art died with them.

\(^{59}\) In the three sub villages of Kampung Sungai Bumbun (mentioned in Chapter 1), namely Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Kampung Sungai Mata and Kampung Sungai Salang, each has its own opoh.

\(^{60}\) Gendoi is a term of respect used for old ladies in their 60s and above. It means “grandmother.”
Embut Jantan mentioned a Tok Mangku, an elderly Mah Meri violinist from Kampung Tanjong Sepat, Selangor, with whom Ahmad Kassim used to play the violin. Embut said that Tok Mangku used to “teach Ahmad Kassim the violin.” I believe what she meant was that Tok Mangku would teach or share with Ahmad Kassim the new songs he had learned from the peninsula, and I suggest that this exchange channeled musical influence from the peninsula.

Unyan Awas was not born in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. His ancestral roots are believed to be in Johore. He arrived in the village on a boat and later married Samah Seman. Both had a love for music and were well known in the village for their music and songs. I believe that Unyan had acquired some skills, knowledge, and even jule repertoire before he arrived in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. He may have been exposed to the music tradition along the southwest coast of the peninsula. Unyan Awas may be one of the innovators of a musical tradition transmitted from the peninsula, for only in the late 1900s had the jule established its position as a prominent instrument in Mah Meri performances.

**Musical Instruments**

During this period, Karim describes a musical ensemble for jo’oh songs that consists of “the violin (biole), the drum (tabe), two bamboo sticks of different lengths (tungtung), and a kind of xylophone made from various bars of light wood bound by a string (genggong)” (Karim 1981, 113). The tawak (gong) is omitted in Karim’s description, but she describes the importance of the banjeng (bamboo tube zither) in healing ceremonies. In the 1980s, Nowak describes a Main Jo’oh ensemble
that performs during the second night of a wedding at Kampung Sungai Judah . . .

"the usual violin, gong, and drum play and occasionally some women play bamboo stampers (dik tengkeng)" (Nowak 1987, 108).

The second night of the wedding ceremony is also the time for the Main Jo’oh, the dance and song cycle performed for ancestors (moyang), reenacting the Btsisi? mythological cosmos. The Main Jo’oh reenacts Btsisi? creation and celebrates the couple. (ibid.,107)

Zainuddin Unyan who is in his late 30s, says that Mah Meri music is unique because of the sounds produced from natural instruments such as tungtung, banjeng, and ginggong. During the first and second generation of the Mah Meri residence in Carey Island, there was only the “buluh centung (tungtung) and ginggong (wooden xylophone)” (Zainuddin Unyan, pers. comm., February 9, 2009).

According to Batin Sidin Bujang, the village head of Kampung Sungai Bumbun, the jule (violins) were gifts from various visiting researchers who visited the Mah Meri.61 Since Skeat and Blagden did not describe the jule, Batin Sidin’s claims of its recent appearance may be affirmed.

. . . the Mah Meri indigenous musical instruments are the buluh centong, ginggong and tambo. Before this, we used a coconut-shelled jule (violin), it was placed on the shoulder and rested on the lap.62 Now they have the modern jule, gifts from various visitors. If I am not mistaken, one of them was Anthony Ratos.63 The gong was a gift from the Malay aristocrats, there was once a time when the Mah Meri were kamcing (cordial relationship) with the Sultan of Malacca. (Sidin Bujang pers. comm., February 14, 2009).

61 Batin Sidin anak Bujang thinks that the late Anthony Ratos (passed away on November 8, 2010) was one of the researchers who gave them a violin. The Main Jo’oh Troupe has three violins now. One is played and kept by Zainuddin Unyan. Gali Adam played the second violin when he had to take over Zainuddin’s role as Zainuddin’s hand became temporarily paralyzed due to a stroke (May 2009). The third violin is an unused half-size violin.

62 It is unclear what Batin Sidin meant by this but it may refer to a spiked fiddle (like the Malay kecapi or rebab).

63 Anthony Ratos bought many Mah Meri woodcarvings and sold them to the museum. His latest book (2006) illustrated many photographs he took of the Orang Asli he visited.
Karim, an anthropologist who lived with Ahmad Kassim for four years gave the Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun a violin after she completed her fieldwork in the village. Pion Bumbung kept the violin64 (Karim, pers. comm., March 9, 2010). Kimmie Khamis, in his 40s, also remembers the *jule* as a gift. His father, Khamis Osman, was presented with a *jule*, which was buried with him when he died.

We seldom use the *banjeng*, except to call on Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang (Princess of the Ledang Hill Spirit). The best *tambo* (drum) player was my father, Khamis Osman. Although he played some *jule* music, he was better at dancing and playing the *tambo*. The *jule* was a gift. (Kimmie Khamis, pers. comm., March 18, 2009)

Gendoi Ranggun Seman said that Ahmad Kassim made his own *jule* (violin) from *mahang* wood (Ranggun Seman, pers. comm., April 22, 2009). Jamilah Kassim, Ahmad’s adopted daughter, told me she regretted selling Ahmad Kassim’s *jule* to Anthony Ratos, who then sold it to the one of the museums in Malaysia. She said, “If I had not sold it to Ratos, I would have at least had some memories of my father” (Jamilah Kassim, pers. comm., April 22, 2009).

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64 Pion Bumbung (Figure 2.4 & 5.6) from Kampung Sungai Bumbun is famous for having created the *patung* (sculptor) known as the *Harimau Rantai Jerat* (The Chained Tiger’s Trap) and the Moyang Melur (Figure 2.4) mask. He is now in his 60s.
Figure 3.5. The Mah Meri musicians of Kampung Sungai Bumbun in the Late 1900s. (Werner 1997, 74)

Figure 3.6. Musicians at Kampung Sungai Judah performing for a wedding. (Werner 1997, 44)
Cultural Contact in Music

The most spontaneous response by Mah Meri villagers to my question about musical life of Kampung Sungai Bumbun from the 1950s till 2000s was “joget at the balai” (central hall) and “Chinese Opera at Bukit Jugra.” Joget is a Malay term to describe a style of dancing and the Mah Meri use this term to refer to the same style of dancing that occurred during late evenings at the main hall for recreational or festive purposes. Gendoi Ranggun Seman, in her 80s now, remembers the musical life during her younger days when jo’oh music was popular in the village. Her description affirms the existence of a combination of Mah Meri and Malay music in village traditions. She names a few well-known jule players, musical instruments, and titles of some jo’oh songs performed when she was younger.

That time I was still schooling; they would have Main Jo’oh at the balai at about 8 pm. There was a busut (mound) made from yellow dirt. There was Ahmad Kassim, Bumbung and his father Usoi (another jule player). When one was tired of fiddling, the other would take over; they would alternate. The banjeng would sound ... keceng keceng keceng ... when there were weddings ... we would ronggeng (joget) ... there were jo’oh songs, Malay poems, Musang Song, Balaw Song and Sidud Song. (Ranggun Seman, pers. comm., April 22, 2009)

Gendoi Ranggun laughs heartily when she remembers her father, Seman, and mother, Pandai, during their musical sessions.

My father, Seman, he used to play the jule (violin). Sometimes the Malays paid him to perform at their house. He played Malay joget and jo’oh songs. My mother, Pandai was famous for her “soft” and “pliable” body. She often aroused cheers when she danced and bent over her head until her hands touched the floor. The villagers would clap and throw some coins for fun. (Ranggun Seman, pers. comm., April 22, 2009).

Gendoi Ranggun’s description resembles the ronggeng scenes at amusement parks during the early twentieth century. According to Tan and Matusky (2004,
in the 1930s and 40s, many *ronggeng* groups performed in entertainment parks in urban Malaya and Singapore. Male patrons bought tickets to dance with female *ronggeng* dancers on the *pentas joget* (dance stage). Although relatively isolated from the mainland, urban popular social music and dances seem to have found their way to the Mah Meri of Carey Island.

Gendoi Embut Jantan, an octogenarian from Kampung Sungai Bumbun, reminisces about her younger days when there were no oil palm plantations, paved roads, electricity, piped water, or bridge adjoining Carey Island to the peninsula. The main mode of transport was via pahuk (boat) or ferry on the small rivers that connected Carey Island to the larger rivers such as the Langat River that led to the Malay Peninsula or the Straits of Malacca. A Chinese temple dedicated to Datok Kong (a local Chinese deity) often hired musicians and performers to perform Chinese Opera during the “Hungry Ghost Festival” on the seventh month of the lunar calendar.

When I was young, before the oil palm plantations, when the trees were high, I used to watch Chinese Opera. When the river was dry enough (low tide), we would get onto a pahuk (boat) and paddle to Permatang Pasir at Jugra on the peninsula. They sold “*macam-macam*” (all sort of things) at the temple. (Embut Jantan, pers. comm., April 20, 2009)

Gendoi Chedan Atan, in her 60s, remembers the excitement at the array of colorful lights, costumes, food, and sacred practices at the Datok Kong temple during the Chinese opera season.

We went to Permatang Pasir, at Jugra Hill, to watch Chinese Opera at the Dato Kong (Chinese local deity) temple. On the first night, they prayed and pierced their tongues on the second and third night; they started performing. The Chinese *towkay* told us, “tomorrow they are still praying, you don’t need to go, but on the third day, you should go, that’s when they have the *wayang* (show).” We waited for the tide, then paddled our boats out in the evening.
and only came home in the early morning. They sold many things at the temple: rambutan, *kuahi* (cakes), and *cendol*. We bought things, watched the opera... *tung tang tung tang* (sound of drums and gongs)... many beautiful costumes. We did not understand what they were saying but we understood the story from the acting. (Chedan Atan, pers. comm., 6 April 2009)

Gendoi Embut and Gendoi Chedan’s descriptions show that Malay and Chinese culture were not foreign to the Mah Meri. Their most trustworthy allies were the Chinese to whom they sold their *attap* for roofs, *nibong* trunks, fruit, chickens, fish, and vegetables from their gardens. There were also Indian immigrant workers at the plantations on Carey Island, but the Mah Meri interacted less with them. The multi-ethnic interactions are apparent in Tan’s (1993) description of the eclecticism of *Bangsawan*, a popular Malay opera genre.

Titah Tebung, in her 40s, states that in the old days, the *joget* was always performed during festivals. She regrets that the villagers seldom gather to dance to *jo’oh* and *joget* songs anymore. During weddings, Mijah Sakit would demonstrate her improvisational skills during the *pantun berbalas-balas* (poem exchange) session. *Jo’oh* tunes were sung to improvised witty debates between villagers (Titah Tebung, pers. comm., April 16, 2009). Song debates are a common musical genre in Southeast Asian traditions, wherein “male and females alternated performing various forms of repartee, creating veritable gender wars, based on wit and double entendre” (Miller and Williams 1998, 6).

Besides the Main *Jo’oh* songs, Nowak states that Malay *joget* music and dance were also popular at weddings, and her statement below also reveals the presence

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65 A dessert made of coconut milk, strips of jelly made from rice flour and *pandan* leaf juice, shaved ice, and palm sugar.
of a song debate culture and a similar pattern of gender division observed during
dancing.

The erotically suggestive words of joget songs are improvised by male and
female singers like Malay pantun (Wilkinson 1959, II: 846). The singers often
trade off phrases, each singing a verse of couplet sometimes competitively.
In joget, partners keep step with each other, moving forward and backwards
in unison. Btsisi partners are often women, men do not join in. When
teenage boys join the dancing, they do as a group, giving each other
emotional support. If many people are dancing, they shift away from dancing
as couples to dancing in two lines responding to each other. (Nowak 1981,
112-113)

Karim notes:

Not surprisingly, the Chinese were often invited to participate in wedding
celebrations of social entertainment, accompanied by barrels of alcohol and
moonshine, traditional or Malay music, important less as an embarrassment
to the Chinese than to the Malays. This is usually the joget and ronggeng,
when men and women dance together and sing (provocative verse of
pantun). (Karim 1986, 66)

Zainuddin Unyan admires the virtuosic violin skills of his father, Unyan Awas.

He says that his father was a better jule player than he is now.

My father was an expert at playing dondang sayang (Baba Nyonya music) and
joget (Malay dance). As for me, I am not good at playing joget songs now.
Actually, the Malays imitated our music. Our music was inherited from our
ancestors; we did not copy from the Chinese, Indian or orang putih (white
people) (Zainuddin Unyan, pers. comm., February 9, 2009).

Zainuddin's statement is very important for it demonstrates the pride of the
Mah Meri in their own musical tradition. Although there were joget songs, the Mah
Meri were able to differentiate between the two. For Zainuddin, there appears to be
a “conscious forgetting” of the Malay joget songs today.

It appears that Mah Meri music has more in common with Malay traditional
music than Chinese music. There is an aesthetic preference for Malay joget music
rather than Chinese opera percussion or instrumental music. Julida Uju, in her 40s
says, “we are not too keen on the loud clanging of drums and gongs” or the “noisy
drums of the Indians (possibly Dhol drumming)” (Julida Uju, pers. comm., July 15,
2009). The tendency to interact more with joget music is also due to a long period
of residence side by side with the Malays on the peninsula.

Musicianship: Ascribed or Achieved?

Musicianship is acquired by individual interest and motivation, not teaching.
Music acquisition is “achieved” and not “ascribed” 66 (Merriam 1964, 131-132) The
Mah Meri describe an interesting cultural phenomenon in transmission of music.
Zainuddin said that he would play around with his father’s jule when his late father,
Unyan Awas, was not using it. Unyan did not formally teach Zainuddin how to play
and would only comment when he wasn’t playing the tunes correctly (Zainuddin

According to Rosiah Kengkeng, the late Usoi also secretly played his father’s
jule while he was at work (his father did not allow him to play the violin for fear
Usoi might break a string, and the strings were expensive). Usoi said his fingers
were very stiff at first, so he pricked his fingertips with the terung pipit (eggplant
sparrows) plant. He then took the tail of a lizard and brushed it across his fingertips.
His fingers then became as agile as a lizard’s tail (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm.,
March 7, 2009).

66 “Ascribed statuses are those assigned to individuals without reference to their innate differences
or abilities. They can be predicted and trained from the moment of birth. The achieved statuses are,
as a minimum, those requiring special qualities, although they are not necessarily limited to these.
They are not assigned to individuals from birth but are left open to be filled through competition and
individual effort” (Merriam 1964, 131)
Maznah Unyan says that because her mother, Gendoi Samah Seman, and the late Mijah Sakit did not share their music with their children and since Maznah had not written the lyrics, they only perform those they remember today (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., April 21, 2009). Rosiah informed me that Mijah Sakit told them that if they wanted to sing, they should write their own music. Mijah said that there is so much around in the forest, mangrove, and sea environment that can inspire the composition of songs. It was said that Mijah seemed to have wanted to take her music to the grave, “seolah-olah nak bawa lagu ke kubur” (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009).

Function of Music

Music accompanied healing rituals and festive occasions such as weddings; dian (durian) flowering, rice planting and harvest seasons, and Ari Moyang (Ancestral Spirits Day) (Embut Jantan, pers. comm., April 20, 2009; Karim 1981; Nowak 1987). The Gemah Lebat Song (Heavy Rain Song) is a call for rain during the durian flowering season. This song is dedicated to the durian spirit, propitiating it for a good harvest. The Dian Festival was previously celebrated in Bumbun. However, it is not practiced anymore. Julida Uju says,

we used to sing the Gemah Lebat Song (Heavy Rain Song) to our moyang to call for rain. Rain helps the durian flowers to “stick,” if the weather is too dry, the flowers will fall off. We tie a bunch of subang (ring-like nipa-plaited flowers) or talisman of nipa around the dian (durian) tree.” (Julida Uju, pers. comm. February 14, 2009)
The Dian Festival was an important festival for the Mah Meri in Kampung Tanjong Sepat in peninsular Malaysia (Ayampillay 1976, 172-173). Gendoi Pieh Mee, who originated from Kampung Tanjong Sepat but now resides in Kampung Sungai Bumbun, describes the Tengkeng Ceremony, which is the dian flowering ritual in that village. This ritual is comprised of three masked dancers; a man, an elephant, and a monkey. The man pretends to sow seeds while the boys masked as elephant and monkey follow behind. Their masks are made from nibong frond (upeh nibong), unlike the finished wooden masks presently found in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. They draw a representation of the elephant and monkey on the palm frond and create the elephant’s tail by rolling together lalang (grass) (Pieh Mee, pers. comm., April 17, 2009).

The old man walks with a cane, creates a hole on the ground, while gendoi (an old woman) places the dian seed into the hole. The jo’oh musicians, the masked elephant and monkey follow behind. The masked monkey runs here and there, delighting with his humorous actions. Everyone laughs, even the Chinese who come to observe the ceremony. (ibid., April 17, 2009)

Ayampillay describes the same ritual in Kampung Tanjong Sepat. The Mah Meri give thanks to their moyang, specifically Moyang Dian (moyang: ancestral spirit; dian: durian) during the Tengkeng or Annual Thanksgiving Ceremony. Each villager contributes to build and decorate the soobang (bunga moyang) or dance hall in a building called the balai tengkeng (balai: hall). The men and boys cut bamboo to build the rectangular, open air shed with a flat roof, while the women prepare decorations made from plaited coconut fronds hung from the roof to supporting pillars. In the center, leaves and fruits such as rambai, rambutan, mangosteen, and durian are placed. “The menfolk will beat out the rhythm of the dance; and the women make symbolic costumes from coconut fronds, which represent the dress which Besese used to wear in ancient times” (Ayampillay 1976, 172-173).
Musical Life: Early 2000s

The Mah Meri maestro, old man Gendol, fiddled beautiful ornamented turns, thrills and lemak\(^{68}\) (rich) slides on Mah Meri jo’oh tunes to the resounding gong tones and drum rhythms. Destinasi, the Temuan\(^{69}\) modern band politely backed an enthusiastic Gendol with chordal accompaniment and soft rhythmic drumming on the drum set… until he finally stopped. And then… they quickly took over.

Scurrying into the dance area to joget lambak, dangdut, kugiran\(^{70}\) and contemporary rock songs were Mah Meri people of all ages. The Indian and “Indon” plantation workers nearby did not miss out on the fun. An old drunkard exhibited peculiar dance movements and came over to tell unintelligible stories to the young girls who tried to appear oblivious. I was cast into a time warp, my imagination of a Mah Meri village music scene of the 60s.” (Chan, Fieldnotes, March 15, 2009)

The above description is of a wedding I attended late at night on March 14, 2009. Although the Main Jo’oh ensemble does not perform anymore, the musical ethos of the community continues to thrive. Their love for music, joget, drinking, and smoking tobacco lives on and their insistence on incorporating some traditional jo’oh songs into the event demonstrates the importance of perpetuating their cultural heritage. The fact that a Temuan band was playing instead of a Mah Meri band shows the growing interaction and acceptance of a variety of musics among the Mah Meri. They play popular Malay songs from the 60s up to the contemporary period, and popular Orang Asli songs such as “Cokodah” from KPCY-2 (a Mah Meri band), and “Zaleha” from RAMSAR (Semelai band) and “Panas-panas” from a Semai band).

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\(^{68}\) In Malaysia, the term lemak often refers to curries with coconut milk that makes them tasty. This metaphor is used to describe a rich, “swooning” sound that makes one’s emotions “swell.”

\(^{69}\) A subgroup of Orang Asli listed under the Aboriginal Malay category

\(^{70}\) Joget lambak (joget: Malay dance, lambak: scattered) is a social dance performed during weddings. Dangdut is music that derives a combination of Malay, Hindustani and Arabic music. Kugiran is Malay “rock ’n roll” music popular during the 1960s.
During late afternoons, the sounds of guitar strumming wafted from various houses in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. The CD player from Sabak Embing’s house plays loud *dangdut* music every day. In addition, Batin Sidin’s daughter, Rabbayyah Sidin sings for an amateur Mah Meri band in the village. Orang Asli bands perform popular Orang Asli, Malay, and Indonesian popular music for weddings and festive celebrations. In 2009, Zainuddin Unyan and Maznah Unyan entered their composition of a popular love song in Mah Meri language for the “National Orang Asli music competition” organized by Asyik FM (the national Orang Asli radio station). This is an example of the musical activities and involvements of the contemporary Mah Meri community.

In 2004, Maznah Unyan created a special cultural group called the “Tompok Topoh” consisting of the Unyan Awas’ *opoh* (extended family). Backed by Samah Seman and a few non-government associations (NGOs), Maznah Unyan formed a women’s weaving team and the Main Jo’oh musical troupe as part of Tompok Topoh. This group provides cultural activities desired by tourist agencies and the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), which include the demonstration of Mah Meri home-cooked food, weaving or woodcarving workshops, music and dance performances, and homestay programs. This troupe represents the cultural identity of the Mah Meri today.

**Musicians and Singers**

The contemporary Main Jo’oh troupe of Kampung Sungai Bumbun is made up of the extended families from the late Unyan Awas’ *opoh*. Samah Seman, his wife,
the former vocalist of the group, is still alive but she does not perform anymore. The Main Jo’oh musicians and the instruments they play are Zainuddin Unyan (jule); Maznah Unyan (singer and banjeng), Che Yah Unyan and Junaidah (tungtung), Pinta Unyan (tambo), and Net Uju or Gali Adam (tawak).

After the death of Unyan Awas in the 90s, the Main Jo’oh troupe of Kampung Sungai Mata fell into decline. However, interest and invitations from government, tourist agents, and other sources spurred the re-assembling of their group. Zainuddin took over the violin while Maznah was urged to be the main vocalist. Growing up with their father’s songs, they both knew the tunes of these songs by memory; however, they were of a priority to perform. The musical pieces and songs recorded, transcribed and examined are revived memories of the music.

During Batin Limpa’s time (the second village head of Kampung Sungai Bumbun), the Mah Meri were very kamcing (cordial relationship) with the Malay royalty. Batin Limpa, who took over from Batin Nantik as the village head, probably lived during the early twentieth century. Therefore, the Malay aristocrats could have been Sultan Abdul Samad, who ruled from 1857-1896 or Sultan Alauddin Sulaiman Shah who reigned from 1896-1937. These Sultans resided in a palace at Jugra. The Mah Meri said they used to paddle their boats over to Jugra and pay homage to the sultan. This degree of cultural contact may have exposed the Mah Meri to the music of Malay royalty. The gong culture is associated with the Malay-Indonesians such as the Bugis, Minangkabau, and Riau-Lingga.71

71 The Minangkabau brought the gong-chime ensemble known as the caklempong in Negeri Sembilan. The Joget Gamelan, believed to have originated from Riau-Lingga, is a dance accompanied by the first
Musical Instruments

The Main Jo’oh instruments of Kampung Sungai Bumbun include the jule, banjeng, tambo, tungtung and tawak (mentioned in the earlier part of this chapter).

Note: Clockwise from rear, Julida Uju (tungtung), author, Maznah Unyan (banjeng), Pinta Unyan (tambo), Che Yah (tungtung), Zainuddin Unyan (jule) and Gali Adam (tawak).

Figure 3.7. Main Jo’oh musicians of Kampung Sungai Bumbun (2009). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Note: Clockwise from rear, Tungtung (Bamboo stamping tubes), jule (violin), tawak (gong), tambo (double headed drum), banjeng (plucked bamboo zither).

Figure 3.8. Musical instruments of Main Jo’oh ensemble. (photo by Clare Chan, 2004)

gamelan set in Malaya. This gamelan set was a royal wedding gift from the Riau-Lingga to Pahang courts (Tan and Matusky 2004; D’Cruz 1979)
**Jule (Violin)**

The *jule* is tuned in fifths, but a fifth lower than the standard western classical violin. The tuning is represented by C3-G3-D4-A4. Interestingly, the tuning of the *jule* is similar to that of the western classical viola, producing a lower and mellower sound. In the contemporary songs examined in Chapters 6 and 7, the *jule* player uses the C major first fingering position of the classical violin, embellishing the pitches with convenient fingering slides to a sharp 4 (F#), flat 3 (Eb), and flat 7 (Bb). I suggest that this fingering pattern is the basis for how the songs I collected and recorded were composed.

![Zainuddin Unyan on the jule (violin)](photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

**Banjeng (Bamboo Tube Zither)**

The *banjeng* is a three stringed-plucked heterochordic bamboo zither. This chordophone is played in a seated position, held horizontally across the body, and plucked or strummed. Zainuddin designed the current *banjeng* to reflect the
features of the *jule*: tuning pegs, a bridge, and a tailpiece (Figure 3.10.1 & Figure 3.10.2). Metal strings or monofilament nylon strings are used to string the zither from the tuning pegs to a tailpiece or holes at the bottom. A resonance hole is made toward the end of the *banjeng*. A bridge is placed near the hole where the players pluck the strings with a plectrum.

The *banjeng* is not tuned to specific pitches. The strings vary in length and can be tuned, but are left to vibrate loosely because it produces a timbral aesthetic desired by the Mah Meri—a silvery shimmery timbre. Although the sound produced is soft, its “jittering” sound penetrates the other layers of music. The two timbres and mnemonic syllables for the *banjeng* are *zhang*\(^2\) and *ching*. *Zhang* is a dampened sound produced by pressing the index finger of the left hand on the shortest string at the bottom (closest to the ground) and strumming all three strings simultaneously; *ching* is produced by strumming the *banjeng* on the three open strings. The dampened and bright sounds produce a syncopated rhythm. This aesthetic is unique to the Mah Meri ensemble. It is not found in *ronggeng* or *joget* ensembles and other Orang Asli music. There is some possibility (since the Mah Meri’s origins are speculated to be in mainland Southeast Asia and they speak an Austroasiatic language) that the style emulates the damped (*ching*) and undamped (*chap*) strokes played by a pair of small pair of brass cymbals in the *piphat* and *mahori* ensembles in Thailand (Miller and Williams, 1998).

\(^2\) I used *zhang* because the letter “Z” is significant differentiated from “C” (*ching*) on the staff notation.
Rosiah Kengkeng says that according to Mah Meri legends, when the banjeng is strummed, its unique sound travel far across seven mountains and seven hills to Ledang Hill. The Princess of Ledang Hill hears the call of the Mah Meri and, in the form of the tiger spirit, she travels across the seven mountains and hills to assist the Mah Meri (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009). Prior to the early 2000s, the banjeng was a sacred instrument allowed only for healing ceremonies.

In many Southeast Asian traditions, the tone color of the tube zithers is one of the most important parameters manipulated for animistic conjuration. In Temiar tradition, shamans give voice to their spirit guides by plucking its strings, and beating its body to produce a high amount of noise (Oesch 1977: 286). Karim states that in Mah Meri healing ceremonies, two banjens are preferred over one, for spirit guides might not descend if the music is too soft or low (ibid.: 180). Recordings of Orang Asli instrumental music that invoke spirit guides (Noone 1995; Oesch 1977, Roseman 1995) are “characterized by specific timbral qualities, tonal row, melodic contours, and rhythmic configurations corresponding to the multiple, detachable souls of distinct entities (Roseman 1998, 9).
Note: Above, tuning pegs and bridge
Right, full body

Figure 3.10.1. The *banjeng* (plucked bamboo zither) (photos by Clare Chan, 2009)

Note: This *banjeng* played by Samah Seman is new and has a tailpiece.

Figure 3.10.2. Samah Seman plucking the *banjeng* (photo by Clare Chan, 2004)
Tambo (Double Headed Drum)

The *tambo* is a double-headed drum (Figure 3.11.2). The drum heads are made of goat or cow skin and are attached to the body with rattan laces. This membranophone is placed upright on the drummer's lap and struck with the hands. It can also be placed in a horizontal position and the drum heads alternately struck with the player's hands or by a wooden stick. The drum timbres and mnemonic syllables are “dung” and “tak,” with “dung” the released strike and “tak” a damped strike.

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*The name might have derived from the word tambourine, a Spanish frame drum. This frame drum may also refer to the *rebana* (frame drum) brought by the Portuguese or Spanish during colonialism.*
Tungtung (bamboo stamping tubes)

The tungtung are played in pairs of different lengths. The long tube produces a low pitch and a short tube produces a higher pitch. The tubes are stamped in duple rhythm on a long horizontal piece of wood. Timbre is more important than absolute pitches. The high and low sounds in the Main Jo’oh are known respectively as kedol (female) or gende (mother) and lemol (male) or kuyn (father).

Bamboo stamping tubes are played in pairs and serve as markers of time in Negrito and Senoi rituals (Roseman 1998, 3). In Roseman’s study of Temiar culture, bamboo stampers must be sounded during the summoning of a spirit guide. Female and male tubes are played in alternation to construct the duple rhythm that consistently underly the singing, that “symbolically joins the pulsing of a human heart with the pulsing of the ambient sounds of the forest” (ibid., 8). Karim (1981) does not mention the use of the tungtung in healing ceremonies, but Skeat and Blagden (1906) mention its use during festivals.

Figure 3.12 Maznah Unyan and Che Yah playing the tungtung. (photo by Clare Chan, 2004)


*Tawak* (Knobbed Gong)

The *tawak* is a bronze knobbed gong with thick walls, a deep rim, and a diameter of about 40 to 70 centimeters. The word “*tawak*” means “to call.” It is an idiophone struck with a padded beater to mark the colotomic structure of the music.

![Tawak (front view)](image1) ![Tawak (back view)](image2)

**Figure 3.13.1.** *Tawak* (front view). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

**Figure 3.13.2.** *Tawak* (back view). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

![Junaidah Striking the Tawak](image3)

**Figure 3.13.3.** Junaidah Striking the Tawak. (photo by Clare Chan, 2004)
SUMMARY

The Main Jo’oh in the early 1900s was described in the *Balai Berentak* as a festival involving drinking games and wife exchanges. It was also performed as a form of recreation during flowering rituals, harvest festivals and weddings. In the late 1900s, the Main Jo’oh was performed during durian flowering rituals, rice harvest festivals and the ‘Ari Moyang’ celebrations. There was little mention of the “wife exchange” games, its decline possibly due to the influence of western notions of a “modern” developed society. In the early 2000s, the Main Jo’oh became a cultural representation of the Mah Meri identity, and was commoditized for the tourism industry. Even though the Main Jo’oh was still performed during the annual ‘Ari Moyang’ celebrations, this ritual itself had become popularized as an annual tourist attraction. The Main Jo’oh had shifted from its sacred and secular function to music as a commodity or a cultural representation. Modern bands made up of guitars and drum sets, performing to popular Malay, Orang Asli or Indonesian songs, replaced music for recreation and leisure in the village in the early 2000s.

In the late 1900s, Karim (1981) and Nowak (1987) describe female and male dancers dancing counter-clockwise around a *busut* (mound). There was no mention of dance choreography during the early 1900s, but an organized structured dance performance was beginning to take place in the late 1900s. This may be due to the Main Jo’oh becoming a cultural representation of the Mah Meri for the growing tourism industry.
Mimicry of animals such as the elephant, deer and pig, representing the spirits of these animals, was already present in the early 1900s. However, in the late 1900s, masked dancers representing supernatural ancestral spirits replaced the mimicry of animal spirits. When smallholdings and wage labor replaced rice agriculture, there was little need to propitiate animal and insect pests that attacked the Mah Meri’s crops. Becoming a settled sedentary people, the Mah Meri focused on the protection of guardian spirits of the village.

The musical instruments retained from the early 1900s to the early 2000s are the drum and bamboo stamping tubes, known as ding tenkking or tungtung in the respective eras. However, the use of pairs of stamping tubes changed from six pairs to one pair. The formation of the Main Jo’oh musical ensemble limited the number of tungtung in the ensemble. The gong was illustrated in photos by Werner (1997), and described by Nowak (1987) in the late 1900s. It was believed to be a gift for peace making from the Malays, therefore suggesting Malay origins. In the early 2000s, the gong has become a standard instrument marking the colotomic units of the music.

Skeat and Blagden (1906) described a bamboo zither known as the keranting. I believe the keranting’s name was changed to the banjeng in the late 1900s. In the late 1900s, it was attributed with much sacred aura—its unique timbral qualities attracted the Princess of Ledang Hill’s spirit during healing ceremonies. However, it lost its “aura” (Baudrillard 1994) in the early 2000s as it became integrated into the Main Jo’oh musical ensemble. The banjeng’s function declined, due to the decline of healing ceremonies, which had been replaced by
modern medicine. The *jule* (violin) only emerged in the Main Jo’oh musical ensemble during the late 1900s and since then has been an important feature in the Main Jo’oh ensemble. However, the Main Jo’oh can be performed even when the *jule* player is not available. As long as the singer is present, the Main Jo’oh is performed. Singing was fundamental to the Main Jo’oh musical ensemble during the song debate sessions in the late 1900s. However, since the function of music and singing has shifted from song improvisations in the early 2000s to musical accompaniment, singing may not necessarily be as important, unless it functions to assert identity or voice concerns. These factors actually encourage singing in the Main Jo’oh today.

This chapter shows how the Mah Meri have adjusted their music and musical instruments to suit changing times. In a span of 100 years, the Mah Meri have made many adaptations to their music and tradition. This accelerated change may be largely due to the rise of the nation-state, its aims for development, and the rapid speed with which globalization trends are affecting every niche of the world.
Chapter 4

SONG TEXTS OF THE EARLY 1900s AND LATE 1900s: ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND SEDENTARY AGRICULTURAL LIVELIHOOD

In Mah Meri culture, song texts are composed through spontaneous improvisation inspired by experiences of the moment. The spontaneity of these texts provide historical records of events affecting the people at a specific time. This chapter examines song texts from two periods—1) the early 1900s, and 2) the late 1900s. Based on these collections, I suggest that in the span of less than a century, song texts have evolved due to socio-ecological changes in the village. I examine continuity and change in Mah Meri song texts, comparing ideas and themes that are retained, eliminated, and innovated.

Song texts of the early 1900s revolved around the Mah Meri’s ecological niche and cultural contacts during their migration and travels. Additionally, the social interactions of the Mah Meri shifted from Malay alliances to Chinese partnerships. The budding tin-mining industry and pepper and gambier plantations attracted many Chinese from Guangdong and Fujian provinces (late 19th and early 20th century), eager to escape lives of poverty in their country. With their cultural qualities of determination, frugality, and entrepreneurship, the Chinese began to play an important role in the economic development of the peninsula during the 19th century. One of the major tin-mining areas was Selangor, the state in which Carey Island is located.
I suggest that the external variable influencing song text composition in the late 1900s was the development of oil palm plantations pioneered by the British and continued by the Malaysian government after Independence. This development gradually impacted the life of the Mah Meri, changing their livelihood, lifestyle, and customs. It also resulted in rapid deforestation of mangrove forests, leading to the extinction of much of Carey Island's native flora and fauna. Lacking territorial freedom, the Mah Meri traditional life style as nomadic boat people or swidden agriculturalists had to be modified to sedentary agriculture. The effects of changing ecology, livelihood, customs, and traditions are reflected through these improvised song texts.

**Songs From the Early 1900s**

During the early 1900s, the main themes in Mah Meri songs were expressions of place (geographical and ecological) and of presence (cultural and social contacts). The Mah Meri's interaction with their surrounding natural ecology (flora and fauna), trade activities, cultural contacts, and communal life inspired their songs. This section shows through song texts how the Mah Meri engaged with mangrove, lowland rainforest, and sea resources.

The songs examined from this era were collected by Skeat and Blagden (1906) from Batin Nantik. Their texts were cited only in English translation, and there is no documentation of the Mah Meri text. There is also no description of how

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74 Batin Nantik was the first village head of Teluk Gunyek, the village situated on the land sold to Valentine Carey for developing oil palm plantation. The villagers dispersed and some settled into what is known as Kampung Sungai Bumbun today.
these songs were collected—whether they were from a canonized repertoire, improvised, or had been internalized through oral tradition. However, I assume that the Mah Meri sang or provided these songs because they felt they were representative of their identity. Skeat and Blagden’s ethnicity as British men worked to their advantage, for the interest of “white” men in the culture of native villagers would have been received with great enthusiasm, especially during a time when British powers were at their height. Therefore sharing songs would have been a task of pride for the Mah Meri rather than of reluctance.

Figure 4.1. Batin Nantik (first village head of Teluk Gunyek).(Skeat and Blagden 1906, 148)

75 Walter Skeat was a British philologist while Charles Otto Blagden (1748, 1820) was a British physicist and scientist.
From Batin Nantik’s repertoire of forty-two songs, twenty-five songs are about animals, five about fruit, five about birds, two about trees, and one about lifestyle. According to Skeat and Blagden (1906, 146), the first ten songs have to be performed in a particular order. Although I have organized these songs in a taxonomy, the content of the song texts often touches upon themes beyond the specific taxonomic category. I will identify multiple excerpts from the same song with Roman numerals, e.g. Tiger Song I and Tiger Song II. As an example of my taxonomy, the Tiger song is placed under the “descriptive” (physical features and behavioral traits) category, although it also could also be placed under the “place name” or “supernatural” category, because it names places and imbues the tiger with an aura of mystery.

During this era, Mah Meri music and dance served functional purposes such as propitiating the ancestral spirits or entertainment during weddings, festivals, or community recreational activities. It is not clear whether these Mah Meri songs became known as jo’oh songs in the later period. However, there is reference to the “Main Jo’oh” as a “drinking bout” (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 145). The recurrent themes in Batin Nantik’s repertoire of songs are 1) naming various places, 2) interaction with the supernatural, 3) the physical and behavioral traits of animals, 4) the hunt, capture and cooking of animals, and 5) equal division of meat from the hunt, 6) trade of resin and aromatic woods for rice and salt in Malacca, 7) other cultural contexts. In the following, I highlight excerpts of songs that express these themes. Sometimes different excerpts from the same song will be used to consider different themes.
Most of the songs are more concerned with the secular than the sacred. Descriptions of animals hunted, captured, and roasted over a fire are shown in the song texts. In Skeat and Blagden’s songs, animals hunted and cooked are the *siamang* (gibbon), *panduk* (deer), *kancil* (mousedeer), and *baning* (tortoise).\(^76\) The Mah Meri used blowpipes to shoot their prey, roasting the killed animal over a fire and sharing it among the community. This division of food was based on a culture of reciprocity, an important traditional trait that bonded the villagers together.

The song texts articulated the group’s rich multi-cultural past, which involved traders, migrants and settlers who traversed the peninsula, increasing the diversity of an already multi-cultural site. Dually oriented to the sea and land, Mah Meri ancestors had a wide knowledge of all the natural life in their environment. This knowledge is important to the present generation because of the decline in appreciation of and respect for nature, seen as a universal continuum in totality with human beings. In the early 1900s, the Mah Meri composed song texts that named many places that they traveled to, and described the animals and plants. Their descriptions, acquired through observations of nature and transmitted through artistic literary imagery, are a remarkable documentation of the behavior of animals and nature of plants.

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\(^{76}\) According to Karim (1981, 123), the Mah Meri ancestors hunted the long-tailed macaque (*macacus fascicularis, Raffles*), mouse-deer (*tragulus ravus*), the spotted deer (*cervulus munrjac*), the monitor lizard, and the pink-necked green pigeon (*treron vernans griseicapilla*).
Place Name Songs

Prominent in many of these songs are place names locating Mah Meri in their historical environment. These songs provide names of places that specific animals frequented, thus suggesting places Mah Meri inhabited or the routes traveled by these sea-mangrove people. Although the names of these places are archaic and the actual places indicated are unclear, I assume, based on previous scholarly research (Karim 1981, Nowak 1987), that these sites are along the coastal areas of Johor, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor.

Elephant Song I traces Mah Meri genealogy to Johor and Selangor (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 147, Braasem, 1952, 10-11). The Toad Song mentions Ulu Langat as a place where the toad dwelled, while the “Solitary Bertam-Palm Song” addresses places where the bertam palm is found. Both Carey Island and Ulu Langat are in the Langat district of Selangor. The Tiger Song names Mount Ophir (or Ledang Hill) in Pahang as the place of the origin of the tiger. This hill is a mysterious place of mysticism, magic and sorcery, a place where Mah Meri had resided earlier (Karim 1981, 216). The Eagle Song names places over which the eagle soared, such as the “Rock of Lalau,” “Hill Precipitous,” “White Rock” and “Rock Perhambang,” while Black Handed Gibbon Song I names places such as Upper Kali and Upper Luar—probably territories inhabited or traveled through by the Mah Meri ancestors. It is unfortunate that the exact locations of the places named in the last two songs in this category cannot be determined.
**Badi (Elephant) Song I**
An Elephant trumpets at Bukit Peralong
A Herd Elephant to the Lone Wild Elephant
'Tis the herd that precedes the Old Wild Elephant
The Sacred Elephant, the Shrunken-foot Elephant
The Magical Elephant from the land of Johor
The Elephant that descends to the salt sea yonder
And thence returns to the Upper Langat
(Skeat and Blagden 1906, 147-148)

**Katak Rengkong (Toad) Song**
*Kok, kok, kok!* That's a toad that's croaking!
A Toad that's croaking his very loudest.
The Toad that dwells at the foot of the forest-trees,
The Toad that dwells on the Upper Langat
(ibid., 156)

**Solitary Bertam-Palm** Song
The Single Bertam at Langkap Berjuntei,
The Single Bertam on the Upper Langat
'Tis the Bertam whose fruits bend over outwards!
We have gathered them and brought them homewards.
(ibid., 160)

**A-aa (Tiger) Song**
... The Tiger roams as far as Mount Ophir
That is the place of the Tiger's Origins
There is His Jinang, there is His Dato'
There is His Jukrah, and there is his Batin
There dwells the “Great Chief” of all the Tigers
The Tiger dies at the house of his Batin.
(ibid., 148)

**Lang (Eagle) Song**
... the eagle glides past to the Rock of Lalau
The eagle glides past to the Hill of Precipitous
The eagle glides past the crag called “White Rock”
The eagle glides past to the Rock Perhambang –
At Perhambang Rock the eagle sinks earthwards.
(ibid., 156)

77 Also known as Dull Bertam Plant, *Eugeissona tristis.*
**Siamang (Black Handed Gibbon) Song I**

Mong, mong, mong! There calls the Gibbon  
The Gibbon that barks at the sun half-risen  
The Gibbon that chatters on the Upper Kali  
Up gets the Gibbon on the Upper Luar.  
(ibid., 152-153)

**Songs Addressing the Supernatural**

Elephant Song I tells the people not to harm the sacred elephant, for it is their guardian spirit. Each Mah Meri village has a guardian spirit, which protects the village from diseases or catastrophes. The elephant spirit may refer to the spirit guardian of Kampung Tanjong Sepat. Male dancers wear masks representing the elephant during the Tengkeng Ceremony,78 (Ayampillay 1976; Pieh Mee, pers. comm., 17 April, 2009).

**Badi (Elephant) Song II**

See that ye slay not the sacred elephant  
For if you do, you will die of sacrilege  
Burn ye then incense, and pay your vows to him  
The sacred elephant loves his grandchildren  
And in his clearings he will not forage  
Nor will he forage among their coconuts  
(ibid., 147-148)

**Lang (Eagle) Song**

Unfortunately, there is no clear description of the location of the places mentioned in this song. The eagle glides by these places and sinks down to the earth in search of the “love-plant” to cure her childrens’ sickness and make their spirit

78 Tengkeng ceremony, similar to the Main Jo’oh is an annual celebration to propitiate the guardian spirit of the Mah Meri of Kampung Tanjong Sepat, located on the peninsula, in the state Selangor.
well again. The eagle may be a metaphor for the *lang* spirit contacted during séances.\textsuperscript{79}

To search for the “Love-plant” upon the mountain
With which to cure her children’s sickness . . .
Thus we find the “Love-plant” upon the mountains,
And our spirit yearn within our body—
The eagle’s own “love-plant,” go bear it homewards,
To make you well again.
(ibid., 156-157)

**Songs Describing Physical Features and Behavioral traits**

Some songs describe the physical features and behavioral traits of animals in intricate detail. The ability to meticulously describe these features reveals Mah Meri intimacy with their ecology. It also shows that many animals threatened with extinction today were still abundant during the early 1900s.

The animals described are either feared by the people or hunted for food. Examples of those feared are the tiger and crocodile. Animals hunted for food are the gibbon and flying fox, usually victoriously captured. The songs also describe the animals as nuisances that feed on Mah Meri fruit trees and other plants. A Mah Meri aesthetic in singing is the mimicry of animal sounds in vocables. Some examples are “impit, impit!,” the call of the rhinoceros; “wah wah, wah!,” the call of the honey-bear; or “mong, mong, mong,” the call of the black-handed gibbon. This aesthetic is still observed in some contemporary song-texts (see Pera Gunting Song, Chapter 6).

\textsuperscript{79} According to Roseman (1991), during the healing ceremonies of the Temiar (a sub-group of Orang Asli) spirits contacted travel across mountains through unlimited distances to communicate with the spirits that may be the cause of sickness or disease.
A’aa (Tiger) Song

The tiger is one of the most feared animals among the Mah Meri. Stories of tigers that metamorphose into human beings to trick them before devouring them are common among the Mah Meri and include Moyang Pongkol (Pongkol Spirit), Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang (Ledang Mountain Princess Spirit), and Moyang Tenong Jerat (Trapped Tiger Spirit). The following song describes the tiger hunting its prey. The tiger’s dwelling place, Mount Ophir near Mount Ledang in Pahang, is also the abode of the legendary Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang (one of the masked characters in the contemporary Main Jo’oh). This is where the tiger rules.

A’aa (Tiger) Song
A Tiger roars at the end of the river-point
What does he want? He wants to be feeding,
To feed on jungle-fowl, to feed on wild boar,
To feed on sambhur, to feed on chevrotin;
The striped Tiger that crosses the salt seas.
(ibid., 148)

Buaya (Crocodile) Song

“Wak wak wak” are the vocables used by the Mah Meri to describe the sounds of the crocodile. In this song, the Mah Meri describe the crocodile’s head as knobbled and lumpy, its tail like a sword-blade, and its teeth clenched together as it basks on the riverbank in wait of its prey. The swampy mangrove of the southwestern plains is especially well known for treacherous crocodiles, and in the past was only frequented by the Orang Asli for nipa and pandanus palm in high demand by traders (Andaya 1982). In this song, the Mah Meri describe the manner in which the crocodile captures its prey, the monkey. It is no wonder these swamps are feared by many.
**Buaya (Crocodile) Song**

Wak, wak wak! There bellows the crocodile!
The "bay" Crocodile to hear her mate of the reaches,
The Crocodile whose head is knobbed and lumpy
The Crocodile whose tail is like a blade sword
The Crocodile whose teeth clenched together
In every river-pool there dwells the Crocodile ...

... there sits a monkey upon the timber
The crocodile smothers him within the river-mud
And when he is dead, it bears him shore-ward
And batters him on timber, to kill him completely
And swallows him whole, when dead completely.
(ibid., 154)

**Ketu Liar (Wild Pig) Song**

This song describes in detail the wild pig that comes to feast on sugar cane.

The vocables “dret, dret, dret” mimic the sound of the wild boar. The wild pig or boar is often hunted for its meat. Karim (1981, 126) states, “the sound of a wild boar in the forest will evoke the comment, *lau’ ming* (cooked food is near) rather than *ketu ming* (the wild boar is near). It can also be a nuisance because it feeds on and destroys the Mah Meri’s cultivated crops and fruit trees.

**Ketu Liar (Wild Pig) Song**

Dret, dret, dret
There grunt the Wild-Pigs,
The Wild-Pig’s litter that feed on sugar-canes,
That eats up our yams and our sweet potatoes.
Till utterly eaten is our plantation.
The Boar, whose feet are sharp and pointed,
The Boar, whose shoulders are sloping and slanting,
The Boar, whose bristles are stiff and stubborn,
The Boar whose eyes are crossed and squinting
The Boar whose ears are pricked and pointed,
The Boar whose chaps are fat extremely
The Boar whose tail is crisp and curly
The Boar has gone down to feed in our rice-fields
Take then your blowpipe scored with patterns
Whiz—and it sticks, and the Boar goes floundering.
Watch very carefully, the Boar is running!
Siamang (Black-Handed Gibbon) Song II

The black-handed gibbon is a tailless, arboreal, black-furred gibbon found only in the forests of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra. There are only two subspecies of the gibbon, the Sumatran gibbon and the Malaysian Black Handed Gibbon. The major threat to the black-handed gibbon is habitat loss due to plantations, forest fires, illegal logging, encroachment, and human development. Oil palm plantations have removed large areas of the black-handed gibbon’s habitat in the last four decades.80

“Mong mong mong” are the vocables that describe the sound of the gibbon. This song describes how the notorious black-handed gibbon’s arrival stirs Mah Meri men to action with their poisonous blowpipes. Hunted for its tasty meat, the black handed gibbon’s presence is announced by the “spraying” (rustling) of meranti81 and ludan82 brushing against each other as the black-handed gibbon arrives in the village swinging from branch to branch. Munching loudly on dry fruit-husks, the gibbon feasts on the abundant fruit surrounding Mah Meri settlements. The song continues to describe the hunt, chase and capture. Once captured, the black-handed gibbon is carried back to be cut up, spiced with pungent jintan (cumin), and roasted over crackling firewood

80 The Siamang (scientific name: hylobates syndactylus) is widely distributed from lowland rainforest to highlands. Its diet is 60% fruit. The 107,000 square kilometers of palm oil planted in Malaysia and Indonesia until 2002, has replaced much rainforest where the Siamang originally lived (Palmer, C. E. 2001).
81 Meranti is the trade name given to a type of timber tree of the genus shorea (Ashton 2004).
82 Unidentified, may be a fruit or tree.
Black-Handed Gibbon (Siamang) Song II
Crash! There he flings through the sprays of ludan,
Now the dry fruit-husks we hear him munching.
Stalk him, there, warily, watch your sharpest,
Mamat the First-born, Mamat the next-born!
Warily, brothers, our Gibbon’s escaping.
Warily, brothers, now pick up your blowpipes …
Warily, brothers, our Gibbon has fallen.
Carry him home, with back bent double,
Carry him homewards, our Gibbon yonder.
Seek ye and search for dry ludan branches,
Seek ye and search for dry changgan\textsuperscript{83} branches,
Search ye for fuel-logs to singe our Gibbon,
Search for and seek hot leaves of chanchang,
Search for and seek the pungent jintan.
The firewood crackles, now stir ye all merrily.
There, it is roasted, now carve it thoroughly.
And give unto each an equal portion.
See that the flesh for all suffices.
Let each have a portion, both big and little.
(ibid., 153)

Lang Kuit (Flying Fox) Song

The Malayan flying fox is unique to the peninsula because it is the largest
fruit bat belonging to the family of mammals called chiroptera.\textsuperscript{84} This song describes
the flying fox that sweeps into the village to eat fruit including the buan (rambutan),
duku, and flowers of the dian (durian). The Mah Meri describe the sounds of the
arrival of the flying fox by the flapping of its wings: “flip-flap” goes the flying fox.”
The description of the sound and sight of the flying fox is one of the remnants of
heritage still prevalent in the contemporary “Kuwang Kuit Song” about a flying fox
(Chapter 6 & 7).

\textsuperscript{83} Unidentified, may be a fruit or tree.
\textsuperscript{84} The Malayan Flying fox (pteropus vampyrus) is the largest fruit bat belonging to a group of
mammals called Chiroptera. They play an important role throughout forest as forest pollinators and
seed dispersers (Fujita & Tuttle 1991).
**Lang Kuit (Flying Fox) Song**

Pe ... lompe lompe! There flaps the Flying Fox
That is the flip-flap if the Flying Fox
The Flying fox from over the water
The Flying fox from the side of the forest
The Flying fox from out the islet
The Flying fox that eats the fruit-buds
That goes about to search for tree-fruits ...
(ibid., 157)

**Songs Representing Cultural Contacts**

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Chinese occupied areas of Selangor due to the flourishing tin-mining industries. In 1891 Kuala Lumpur, 79 percent of the population of 43,586 was Chinese. The Chinese involvement in plantation agriculture and mining began in the 18th century, and they soon monopolized production in these industries (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 140). Chinese labor brought in from the southeast provinces of Guandong, Fujian, and Guangxi consisted of five major socio-linguistic groups. In the 18th century, many Chinese miners married Orang Asli women because Chinese women were not allowed into the country then (ibid., 141). Initially, the mines were controlled through Malay-Chinese partnerships, such as the cooperation between Raja Juma’at, a Riau prince, and Chee Yam Chuan, a fifth generation Baba Chinese who headed the Malacca Hokkien community. Raja Juma’at’s brother, Raja Abdullah controlled Klang Valley; they merged to borrow capital from Chee. This merging established the tin mines of Ulu Kelang in 1857. Tin mines at Ampang and Kuala Lumpur also

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85 Teochew and Cantonese from Guandong; Hokkien (Fujian); Hakka from the mountain areas of Guangdong, Guangxi and Fujian; Hainanese from the island of Hainan. Many wanted to escape lives of poverty in these areas (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 140).
86 Baba is a Persian loan word borrowed by Malaysian as an honorific solely for grandparents; it was used to refer to the Straits-Chinese males.
attracted many Chinese traders and shopkeepers (ibid., 143). With the entrepreneurship skills and support of the kongsi (Chinese clans) and the hui87 (Chinese secret societies), the Chinese monopolized the tin mining industry in the areas of Sungai Ujung, Lukut, Kuala Lumpur.88 Elsewhere in Johor, the cultivation of pepper and gambier89 was established through a successful partnership between Malays and Chinese investors during Temenggung Ibrahim’s era in the mid-19th century. However, this partnership disintegrated when the Chinese began to bypass Malay chiefs to provide salaries directly to the workers. This move accelerated both Chinese control over the economy and higher profits, leaving out the Malay middleman. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Mah Meri dealt directly with the Chinese middlemen in the trading of resin, rattan, nipa,90 nibong,91 fish, crabs, and fruit.

Mah Meri cultural interaction with the Chinese can be seen through intermarriages, trade, and cultural events. The songs demonstrate the importance of mangrove wood such as merbau92 and pulai93 for the manufacture of boats used to sail these goods to the “Chinaman.” One interesting product traded to the Chinese was animal parts such as rhinoceros horn and bear spleen. The demand for these

87 Ghee Hin, Ho Seng and Hai San were three large hui in the Straits Settlement in 1825 (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 145).
88 The supply of capital from the Straits Settlements was initially controlled by Baba or Peranakan (Malay-Chinese) society who made up 14.53 per cent of the population in 1881. Although rich Malay traders existed for centuries, they had little ability to maintain liquid capital for investment, largely due to the cultural display of wealth as an important aspect of being (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 142)
89 In 1860, there were 1200 gambier and pepper plantations in Johore. Approximately 15 000 Chinese laborers to 100, 000 in the following next ten years (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 144).
90 Nypa fruticans, species of palm.
91 Oncosperma tigillarium, species of palm.
92 A type of mangrove wood.
93 A type of mangrove wood.
affirmed a gradual solidification of Chinese culture in the peninsula as thousands of years of Chinese medicinal expertise was transmitted from China to the peninsula. Animal organs harvesting requires expertise in hunting these animals, a skill the Mah Meri developed to a high degree.

Other songs describe trade with the Chinese in forest products, such as resin, gaharu or agarwood, and gutta percha. Temenggung Ibrahim monopolized this trade, which grew in importance during the 1840s and revived a declining interest in foraging among the Orang Asli (Andaya 1982, 134; 2001, 138). However, this industry would not survive because the European investors desired to harvest gutta-percha in large quantities, a practice that would not be in agreement with the Orang Asli’s worldview of punan and the Mah Meri’s concepts of tulah and kemali (literally, curse and taboo).

Merbau Tree Song

The Merbau Tree Song and the Pulai Tree Song (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 161) demonstrate the importance of the Orang Asli in providing the international maritime trade of the Malacca Empire with resources of aromatic woods, medicinal herbs, and spices so desired by the East. The Merbau Tree Song mentions resin, wax,

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94 Gutta percha (palaquium) comes from the Malay name, getah percha (percha rubber). It is a rubbery substance or latex from a type of tropical tree valued for its use in protecting underwater cables used in submarine telegraphy.
95 Punan is the Semai concept of being frustrated due to a lack of satisfaction or fulfillment (Robarchek 1977)
96 Merbau (Afzelia palembanica) is one of the finest timbers used for boat making in the Peninsula (Skeat and Blagden, 1906, 161, fn 1).
eagle-wood,\textsuperscript{97} and gutta percha being collected and shipped off to Malacca for salt and rice in exchange.

\textit{Merbau Tree Song}

\ldots Load we our ship with wax and eagle-wood,
Load her with benjamin,\textsuperscript{98} load her with resin,
Load her with \textit{gutta,} with \textit{“gutta taba”}
Hoist up your mast and sail forth seawards,
And shape your course to the sea of Mambang;
Drop your anchor and climb up shorewards,
And barter your goods at the people’s houses,
See, our boat points to the land of Malacca,
Our anchor drops just off Malacca,
To barter wax and barter resin,
To barter Benjamin, barter gutta
And salt and rice to take us cargo.
Now points our boat towards our country,
Now call we comrades, big and little
To carry our wares up to the houses
And give them each his portion.
(\textit{ibid.}, 161)

\textit{Pulai Tree Song}

The Pulai Tree Song describes the felling of the \textit{pulai} tree for making dugout canoes. These canoes were crucial for the livelihood of Mah Meri who traded their goods to the “Chinaman.” The Mah Meri of Carey Island loaded fruit from their gardens in their \textit{pahuk} (dugout canoes) to ship to Permatang Pasir at Jugra on the peninsula. This song reveals the shift of trading partners from the Malays to the Chinese \textit{towkay} (businessmen), whom the Mah Meri found to be more trustworthy. Even today, the Chinese middlemen also maintain relationships with the Mah Meri by loaning them money to repair their boats or to invest in seeds for their oil-palm

\textsuperscript{97} Eaglewood or gaharu (\textit{Aquilaria malaccensis}) is used to make lign-aloes, incense wood, a priced item in the Far East.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{kemian} (benzoin), gum Benjamin, \textit{styrax benzoin}. This gum is obtained by cutting the bark (Skeat and Blagden, 1906, 161, fn 3)
plantations. In exchange, the Mah Meri maintain their loyalty to the Chinese middlemen (Che Yah, pers. comm., February 12, 2009).

**Pulai Tree Song**

... We take an adze and fell the *Pulai*,
And build a canoe to trade to Malacca;
To barter goods and sell our coconuts,
Then homewards turn our boat of *Pulai*;
Beach we it then, and o’er, haul it thoroughly,
Sell to a Chinaman for a hundred dollars!’
(ibid.,162)

**Bear Song**

The Bear Song describes bears roaming from lowland rainforests to mangrove forests in search of honey. The bear is hunted down and its spleen or bile sold to the Chinese “doctor.” Traditional Chinese medicine uses the bear’s spleen to fight fever, for detoxification, and to reduce inflammation, swelling and pain (Feng et. al, 2009). Due to the bear’s ability to climb and fall a considerable distance without getting hurt, the spleen was a medicinal cure for people who had fallen (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 149, fn 3). Therefore, this song reveals the presence of the Chinese and their cultural heritage on the southwestern coasts of the peninsula.

**Bear Song**

That climbs the bee tree to seize wild-bees,
That roams to the crags and descends to the salt sea,
That yearns to devour the wild-bees utterly
That climbs up the mangroves, and rends them open
That climbs up the *kempas* trees and rends them open.

Chop at him now, you, Mamat the First-born!
Dodge now the Bear, O Mamat the First-born!
He dies! Oho, you have killed the Honey bear!
Now take his spleen to doctor the fallen.
(ibid., 149)
The Song of the Rhinoceros depicts the Mah Meri hunt for a rhinoceros as well as encounters with Chinese immigrants and traders. After successfully gunning down the rhinoceros, the Mah Meri cut up its meat and divide it equally. The prized horn is sold to the Chinese “foreigners,” who use its powdered form for alleviating fevers and convulsions, not as an aphrodisiac as is commonly misconceived (Bensky 2004). This song affirms the stereotypical role of the Chinese, known for their intricate knowledge of herbal remedies.

**Song of the Rhinoceros**

... The bullet has hit him. The Rhinoceros has fallen
See that ye singe then and quarter the Rhinoceros
And give to eat a little to every one;
But sell the horn to the Chinese foreigners.
(ibid., 148)

Skeat and Blagden note that “the horn of the rhinoceros is greatly prized among all races in the Malay peninsula, as possessing extraordinary magical virtues. The Chinese, as a rule, are the best customers of the aborigines” (ibid.).

**Songs of Communality**

Many of the songs in Batin Nantik’s collection document the importance of a communal spirit in the Mah Meri life style wherein each hunting success leads to an equal division of meat among the villagers. The Semai and Temiar practice communal living that draws from an egalitarian culture where reciprocity is fundamental to their livelihood. This trait is less described for the Mah Meri, who have traits of both Senoic and Aboriginal Malays. The former practice many egalitarian principles, whereas the latter are governed by a social system based on a leadership hierarchy that culminates in decision-making based on consensus.
The Mah Meri lifestyle appears more independent because many were originally sea people, fishing and hunting on boats. Unlike the Semai culture, in which the men hunt and the women planted staple foods, the Mah Meri husband and wife work as a team. Many songs collected by Skeat and Blagden (1906) emphasize the equal division of food from the hunt. Therefore, these songs show that Mah Meri lifestyle emphasized a system of communality and reciprocity. This may also relate to the concept of *tulah* and *kemali*, where the breaching of codes will result in bad luck. Examples where equal division is emphasized are shown below:

**Baning (Tortoise) Song**
Now you’ve expelled it, Mamat the First-born
Carry it homewards, Mamat the First-born
Mamat the First-born, now cut up your Tortoise
Chop it up small and let it be roasted;
And when it is roasted, serve it on leaf-plates,
And give unto each an equal portion
Ho, Mamat Solong!
Come, now your belly's full, drum on the Hall-floor
(ibid., 155)

**Kancil (Chevrotin) Song**
... Now we have captured him, bear him homewards.
And when ye are home again, see that ye singe him
When ye have singed him, cut him in quarters.
When ye have quartered him, make ye the cooked meat,
And give unto each his equal portion.’
(ibid., 151)

**Panduk (Mouse-deer) Song**
... ‘Lo now, he has killed the milk-white Mouse-deer.
Carry ye homewards the milk-white Mouse-deer,
And cut into quarters the milk-white Mouse-deer,
And give unto each his equal portion.
(ibid., 151)
**Bro’ (Coconut Monkey) Song**

... Bear him homewards and there throw him down again.  
Aunt Solong, I pray you, singe me this monkey,  
And you, Mamat Solong, cut up this monkey,  
And give each an equal portion.  
(ibid., 152)

**Feasting Songs**

Some songs describe the *Berentak Balai* (Rhythmic Drumming in the Tribal Hall), which takes place at the *balai* (open-air shed), a gathering place for public events held in the village. These festivals are celebrated with special foods and *tampoi* (an alcoholic beverage from fermented fruit), music, and dance. Drinking is a popular tradition among Mah Meri villagers. In the “Solitary Bertam-Palm Song,” men and women feast, drink, sing, and dance to the songs at the *balai*. Although there is no reference to these songs as *jo’oh* songs, these feasts are sometimes called “drinking festivals” or Main Jo’oh (drinking game) (ibid., 145). Wishes for a plentiful harvest for the following year are expressed.

In the *Kijang* (Roe-deer) Song, young men perform the dance of the *kijang* to please the villagers, which indicates that the mimicry of animal spirits already existed during the early 1900s. Today, young male dancers wearing masks also mimic the action of specific *moyang* (ancestral spirit) during the annual ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day) festival to the amusement of the audience. Festivals are also places for meeting potential wives or husbands. In *Gabang* Fruit Song, Mah Meri men and women dress up to attract the opposite sex during these festivals, which conclude with a “wife exchange” game.
Solitary Bertam-palm\(^99\) Song
Come ye, my little ones, make you merry,  
Make each of you merry within the Balei  
And when you have eaten and gorged your belly  
Rise to your feet, O Mamat Alang.  
Drink and make merry within the Balei,  
The Balei that’s broad, the long-floored Balei  
And call out folk to dance and make merry  
This is a year when fruits are plentiful.  
(ibid., 160).

Kijang (Roe Deer) Song
Make merry with drink within the Balei,  
The broad-floored Balei, the long-floored Balei.  
‘Tis the young folk’s custom to ‘dance the Roe-deer,’  
To please the men-folk and please the women.  
Young folk so many within the Balei.  
Tomorrow and ever be years of plenty  
Plenteous our fruit, our rice-crop plenteous  
Fruit ... Fruit! Fruit! Fruit, oho!’  
(ibid., 150)

Gabang\(^100\) (Wild Jungle Fruit) Song
When you have eaten the fruit of yon Gabang  
Rise to your feet, O Mamat Solong  
And drink and make merry within the Balei  
As was the custom of your grandfathers  
The little ones sport within the Balei  
An all the men-folk are fain to watch them  
Come hither then with your unbound tresses,  
And make your tresses as fine as possible  
To catch the eyes of all the men-folk ...  
(ibid., 150)

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\(^99\) *Eugeissona tristis*, Griff (palma) (Skeat and Blagden 1906: 160, fn 2)
\(^100\) unidentified wild jungle fruit (ibid.: 150)
**Songs From the Late 1900s**

During the 1970s, the Malaysian government began to promote the Mah Meri for tourism. Fitting the category of exotic indigenous cultures, the Mah Meri were chosen as representatives of Malaysia's harmonious, colorful and multi-cultural potpourri. Before a bridge was built connecting Carey Island to the peninsula in 1985, the only way to reach Carey Island from the peninsula was by ferry or *pahuk* (boat). Therefore, there were not many tourists and visitors to the Mah Meri villages at that time. The Mah Meri festivals thrived in a private and secluded space, devoid of electricity and water supply, television, or telephone.¹⁰¹

Between he early 1900s and the late 1900s, the naming of places and descriptions of plants and animals in song texts decreased. British investment in commercial agriculture in the early 1900s, would largely change the ecology of Carey Island. During the early 1900s, oil-palm plantations were vastly expanded. By the early 2000s, about two thirds of Carey Island had been converted into these plantations. Much of the mangrove forest, together with its diverse flora and fauna, has disappeared. Tigers, crocodiles, pythons, gibbons, and wild pigs have lost their habitat. Descriptions of hunting and capturing animals became rare in the songs of the late 1900s examined, as these animals either became extinct, migrated, or began living close to the villagers. They often become nuisances due to eating cultivated crops. The monkey is now a threat to the durian shoots, while the porcupine destroys the newly replanted pandanus.¹⁰²

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¹⁰¹ Piped water became available only in 2003, while electricity arrived in 2005.
¹⁰² In a project funded by United Nations Development Project (UNDP)
Song texts from the late 1900s reveal a change to describing cultivated fruits and local plants in Mah Meri villages. These songs also describe a settled, sedentary village lifestyle and a shift from subsistence living to dependency on the market economy. Songs describing endemic flora and fauna were slowly eliminated from the repertoire. Among the seven songs from the late 1900s, two had titles of *moyang* (ancestral spirits): Jaboi Song and Tok Naning Song. This is an innovation in song texts theme, for unlike the early 1900s, where only excerpts of songs were addressed to these spirits, this period had songs with titles about a spirit. Although these songs were named after the *moyang*, there were only a few lines addressing them. One of the reasons for the emergence of *moyang* songs could be due to the sedentary lifestyle where a village is often placed under the protection of a *moyang*. Stories of supernatural beings sighted in the forest were also made into song.

The component of advice, another innovation in song texts hardly heard in the music of the early 1900s, began to be prominent. Expressions of human emotions also begin to emerge in songs of this period, including the aspect of love. This may be the result of inspiration during weddings and festivals, as well as the influence of Malay contact. Unlike the songs of the early 1900s, which told a story that focused on a theme, songs of the later era are multi-thematic and have no central idea and also explore descriptions and phenomena beyond the titles. This era shows the beginnings of the pastiche (Jameson 1991), a method of composition in postmodernist style, which will be elaborated further in the contemporary song texts analysis (Chapter 6 and 7).
The Main Jo’oh

In the 1970s, Mah Meri songs became known as Main Jo’oh songs. Although there were kutai songs performed for healing ceremonies, the Mah Meri I interviewed only mentioned jo’oh-style and joget-style songs. Karim (1981) described the Main Jo’oh as the music and dance of the Mah Meri performed mainly during ‘Ari Moyang (‘ari: day, moyang: ancestral spirit) and other festivals, an annual ritual celebrated to propitiate the Mah Meri moyang. Karim describes the Main Jo’oh’s purpose as to “invite plant, animal, and human spirits to celebrate an occasion of great rejoicing” (ibid., 113). I collected and transcribed seven Main Jo’oh songs from the Kampung Salang opoh.103 These songs were from the late Ahmad Kassim, a famous violinist and his wife, the late Mijah Sakit, a popular vocalist during that time (Chapter 3).104 These jo’oh songs emphasized hunting, courtship, parental love or rejection, and food.

Similar to the first ten of Batin Nantik’s forty songs, which must be sung in appropriate order, these seven songs must be completed before any one song is repeated. They are sung in the following order. (Karim’s original titles are maintained).105

103 Kampung Sungai Salang is a sub-village of Kampung Sungai Bumbun, while opoh refers to the extended family of that sub-village.
104 Karim is a Malaysian and her ability to speak Mah Meri language commanded the respect of the villagers (Pion Bumbung, pers. comm., March 13, 2009).
105 I chose to keep these titles to preserve the manner in which Karim presented her collection. For example, Lagu Siamang Timbong has reference to a particular myth although Karim’s song texts do not discuss the myth. My interviewees also mentioned Lagu Titik Musang (Song of the Civet Cat) which is a descriptive title with reference to the spots of the musang (civet cat). Maintaining these titles in this section preserves the ways in which the people thought of these animals. However, I have chosen different ways of naming and presenting the songs I collected because of the ways the villagers began referring to them. (Chapter 7)
1. *Lagu Si-Ooi* (Song of the Coppersmith Barbet)
2. *Lagu Jaboi* (Song of the Ogre Jaboi)
3. *Lagu Gemah Lebat* (Song of the Heavy Rain)
4. *Lagu Cheep Gunting* (Song of the Peacock-Pheasant)
5. *Lagu Siamang Timbong* (Song of the Black-Handed Gibbon)
6. *Lagu Tok Naning* (Song of the Ancestor Tok Naning)
7. *Lagu Titik Musang* (Song of the Civet Cat)

**Moyang Songs**

*Lagu Jaboi* (Song of the Ogre Jaboi)

Jaboi is a *moyang* sighted in the Malaysian forest. Other Orang Asli refer to it as “Marwas.” According to Che Yah (pers. com., February 2009), Jaboi has an upside-down nose and inverted feet (toes facing backward). Jaboi leaves huge footprints in its path. If its footprints appear to be headed north, it is actually headed south. Jaboi is afraid of the rain and detests the rainy season for fear water will drip into its nose, so it uses a *pallas* leaf to cover it.

According to Che Yah, Jaboi has shears attached under its arms, acting as a weapon/knife that cuts away leaves of plants and trees that hinder its path in the forest. If you meet an unfriendly Jaboi, hurl a *simpai* (a wrist bracelet woven from rattan). Believed to have powers of sorcery, the *simpai* gets entangled in Jaboi’s wrists, disenabling the use of its hand shears (Che Yah, pers. comm., February 12, 2009).

The Ogre Jaboi Song describes native plants and animals from the jungle including the *pepat* (mangrove plant), *nireh* trees, and the *ketab bangsal* (mangrove crab). However, the song also explores cultivated plants from the Mah Meri gardens such as *kanjik* (cashew-nut) and *boi* (sugar cane). The song addresses the villager’s sense of belonging, and suggests that they continue to multiply in the village. The
following song reflects the gradual change from a central focus on a single theme to multi-thematic texts. A variety of themes is gradually emerging in the composition of songs. Other than the highly improvisatory nature of the music, socio-political effects may be one of the reasons for such change. The songs are not structured in strophes but are through-composed.

Figure 4.2. Moyang Jaboi (Jaboi Spirit) sculpture by Awas Sayur. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
**Laguk Jaboi (Song of the Ogre Jaboi)**

Oh ketab bangsal di ha bangsal
Telo’ kanjik ditekoh boi

Lagu nahok asal dilaguk asal

Sebab leh janjik Jaboi di moyang Jaboi
Telok kanjik boi ditekoh boi

Peleh pepat nireh tekoh nireh
Sebab janjik Jaboi di moyang Jaboi

Nakeh tempat gereh bergantung gereh
Eheh main lamai biar dilamai
Daun nireh chamai didaun chamai
Pelek tulak boi bauk diboi

Eheh main lamai biar dilamai
Daun nireh chamai didaun chamai
Nakeh gelah

(Karim 1981: 238)

**Lagu Tok Naning (Song of the Ancestor Tok Naning)**

Karim (1981, 113) depicts Moyang Tok Naning as an ancestor who lived in the forest and eventually married the spirit Jaboi. Maznah Unyan states that Tok Naning is a historical mythical figure seen by the villagers of Kampung Sungai Bumbun who protects and guards the village (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., February 23, 2009) This song describes Tok Naning’s character as a mixture of human characteristics such as greed, and over-indulgence with non-human qualities. Villagers describe Tok Naning as an old man holding a bakul (water-container) made from palm frond and carrying a bakul nibung (palm basket) behind his back. Tok Naning collects, preserves (by salting), and stores animals, plants, and objects.
The song texts below describe him filling his basket with fruit, deer, ducks, and cassava. The naming of plants and domesticated animals in the village are one of the innovated features of song text composition in the late 1900s. Tok Naning’s head aches and his eyes become painful because he collected too many items and cannot remember where he put his things. This song ends with an expression of the values of the society, one that remembers another’s kind deed for you. Similar to the Jaboi Song, this song is multi-thematic and in through-composed form.

**Laguk Tok Naning (Song of the Ancestor Tok Naning)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Heh Tok Naning bangkuk lehok</em></td>
<td>Our old man Naning carries a water-container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Isi peleh nenek, peleh nenek</em></td>
<td>He fills it with its fruits, fills it with his fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>E’eit koi pening, met gohop</em></td>
<td>My head aches, my eyes are painful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tolong tangkal nenek kehei nenek</em></td>
<td>Please grandfather makes me better, I ask you grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Itek pandok, itek batek</em></td>
<td>The deer duck, the spotted duck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Meri pandok itek batek</em></td>
<td>The place where humans plant, the plant cassava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tempat ma’ngeteb, ngeteb nale</em></td>
<td>My luck is borne to my heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nasib e’eit ngandong hatik</em></td>
<td>For a good deed, I will remember</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Budik lep kele, ingat kele</em></td>
<td>(Ibid.,247)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Animal Songs**

Four of the remaining songs are about animals: *si-ooi* (the coppersmith barbet), *siamang* (black-handed gibbon), *cheep gunting* (peacock pheasant), and *musang* (civet cat). These songs describe the behavior of these animals, but also explore various additional topics besides those revolving around the animal. The emphasis is on changing food sources, rather than descriptions of animals or
naming places. Combining expression and descriptions begins in these songs, which takes on full form in the contemporary songs in the early 2000s (Chapter 6 & 7).

*Laguk Siamang Timbong* (Song of the Black-Handed Gibbon)

The Song of the Black-handed Gibbon (*Siamang*)\(^{106}\) transcribed by Karim (1981) shows many similarities with the one collected from Batin Nantik. Although the song texts are slightly different, the general theme of hunting the *siamang*, seasoning it with cumin as in Batin Nantik’s collection, and roasting it over a fire is maintained. The usage of the vocables “mong mong” in mimicry of siamang’s cry is also retained. The *siamang* is still described eating as the *ludat* fruit, the *periau* (shoots of the *meranti* tree), hunted and shot with a blowpipe, then being roasted and equally distributed. Proving that the concepts of *tulah* and *kemali* were still influential among the Mah Meri in the late 1900s, this song mentions that if one does not distribute the meat equally, one will suffer *punan* (a state of deprivation), as a result of *tulah*, the breaching of codes. The song text also mentions singing and dancing at the *balai*, “step singly on the swaying platform.”

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\(^{106}\) *Black-handed gibbon* (*Hylobates lar*)
**Laguk Siamang Timbong (Song of the Black-Handed Gibbon)**

"Mong-mong" siamang  
Siamang timbong  
Siamang eru' Sindong Kalek  
Jo' melentek jemu ampah  
Siamang timbul Sindong Kalek  
"Dimpong dimpong," cho siamang  
Siamang ratuh siamang libuk  
Siamang tunggal hinkik tibak  
Hagah nachah peleh ludat  
Jampak, "periau," puchok ludan  
Dak melidak peleh ludat  
Siamang tibak  
Hagah nachah peleh ludat  
Dem du' daging siamang  
Kaluk cheroh, daging siamang  
'Tangkoi, hondoi' ka-ai hadu'  
Telo' telo', lanting lengai  
Hagah mengayu daging siamang  
Ee, ai  
Mui, enak, telo' telo' pedas hitam  
Hagah melapah daging siamang  
Oi, ka-u', telo' telo', pedas kachang  
telo' telo' pedas hitam  
Bagik leh muntet-muleh  
Kaluk bagik ngot, jadak punan  
Jadikan punan daging siamang  
Mari leh, heh main  
* Balei kadei, balai kenin  
Pijak genah lanteh langung  
Pijak genah lanteh betam  
Pijak genah lanteh tenong  
Adat nenek, adat sungut  
Sungut baik adat moyang

"Mong-mong," siamang  
The siamang timbong  
The siamang calls from Sindong Kalek  
With spreading feet; hang out the mat  
The siamang appears in view at Sindong Kalek  
"Dimpong dimpong," goes the siamang  
The hundredth siamang, the thousandth siamang  
Then the lone siamang it arrives  
It wants to eat the *ludat* fruit  
It throws, "*periau,*" the shoots of the *belantik* tree  
The fruit falls, the *ludat* fruit  
The Siamang arrives  
It wants to eat the *ludat* fruit  
Run quickly with the *siamang* meat  
If you find *siamang* meat  
*Tangkoi hondoi,* carry it to your house  
Look, look for twigs from the *ludat* tree  
Want to smoke the *siamang* meat  
Ee, oh ...  
Aunt, one of you, look, look for black pepper  
Want to season the *siamang* meat  
Oh elder sister, look, look for hot pepper  
Look-look for black pepper ...

Distribute it, a little to everyone  
If not distributed, one would suffer *punan*  
Suffer *punan* from the *siamang* meat  
Come please, let us sing and dance  
On the large platform, on the small platform  
Step singly on the swaying platform  
Step singly on the *betam* platform  
Step singly on the ancestors platform  
It is the law of our ancestors, their strict law  
Strict but good is our ancestor's law ...

(ibid., 243)


Laguk Cheep Gunting (Song of the Peacock Pheasant)

The Malayan Peacock-pheasant\(^{107}\) is an endangered species threatened by deforestation. It is a shy, elusive bird endemic to lowland forests of the Malay Peninsula, from the Isthmus of Kra region southwards. The Mah Meri have some interesting descriptions of this bird. My understanding of this song was enhanced by my interview with Ranggun Seman. The bird’s loud, cackling noises were described by Ranggun Seman as represented by the vocables, “Peraaaa.. peraaa ... gunting, ting, ting.” Ranggun says that when the *kejel* (sweet potato) is almost ripe, the bird will start making noises, which are described in the lyrics below.

Pera Gunting, pera gunting, ting, ting, ting ... We only hear the sound of the bird but we don’t see it. The elders composed a song for it. However, we don’t hear this bird any more because there is no more forest. (Ranggun Seman, pers. comm., April 22, 2009)

Ranggun commented that the bird is not heard anymore, evidence of its disappearance from the Mah Meri environment. Many of the Mah Meri I interviewed had no idea what bird this song referred to, yet they remember the vocables used to describe the bird. The song is also associated with a popular dance movement, which helps Mah Meri remember it. The song, under the title “Pera Gunting,” is still part of the contemporary repertoire discussed in the next chapter.

\(^{107}\) The Malayan Peacock-pheasant (*polyplectron malacense*) is also known as Crested Peacock-pheasant or Malaysian Peacock-pheasant listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. See McGowan, Philip J.K (1994, 148).
Laguk Cheep Gunting (Song of the Peacock Pheasant)

‘Ting’ ting’, eru’ leh gunting
Ting, Ting’ calls the gunting bird
Bile eru’ paneh ari’ leh paneh
When it calls, it is hot, the day is hot
Memang eru’ ari’ leh paneh
It is true when it calls, the day is hot
Hinkik nelok kejel, helak kejel
It searches for the kejel, the kejel sweet potato
Bile telo’ leh helak leh kejel
When one searches for the kejel sweet potato
Bila sebot ngot lep, isik leh lep
When there is no call, the sweet potato is far
Kejel leh, batang bedong
The kejel stem twines round and round
Jangka dak lep isik leh lep
When there are roots, the sweet potato is far
Batang duri’, jangka dijelang
The stem is thorny and the root is long
Bile cheroh isik kob dikachah
When one finds the sweet potato, it can be eaten

(ibid., 242)

Laguk Titik Musang (Song of the Civet Cat)

There are many species of civet cats found in Malaysia. The civet cat
probably refers to the Common Palm Civet\textsuperscript{108} or musang pulut found from the
Himalayas to southern China, as well as in the Philippines, the Malay peninsula, and
Indonesia. It is a highly adaptive animal and can live in dense forests, agricultural
areas and even alongside humans.

The Song of the Civet Cat describes places, plants, animals, and fish of the
Mah Meri habitat. Innovations include the naming of cultivated plants but also
retain the endemic fauna. Gage (pennywort), pinang (areca nut), and ngale (cassava)
are cultivated plants consumed by them (gage grows widely in the Mah Meri
village).\textsuperscript{109} Pinang ngale (areca nut cassava), wrapped in betel nuts and tobacco, is

\textsuperscript{108} Common Palm Civet (\textit{Paradoxurus hermaphroditus}).
\textsuperscript{109} The Mah Meri stir-fry the gage (pennywort) with garlic and \textit{cili padi} (bird’s eye chilly).
symbolic of the Mah Meri culture. Most of the Mah Meri chew *pinang* at any time of the day. Those unfamiliar with the taste will find the nut bitter and hard. Julida Uju says that the *pinang* is their “toothpaste” (pers. comm., March 17, 2009). *Ngale* (cassava) is abundant in the village. The Mah Meri love to roast *ngale* (cassava) over a fire made from twigs and dried branches. The shoots of the *ngale* tree are stir-fried as food.\textsuperscript{110} Besides plants, there are two types of mullet endemic to the rivers: *belanak kawah* (grey mullet) and black mullet. The grey mullet appears when there is heavy rainfall (Gali Adam, pers. comm., March 17, 2009).

The song adds an extra element of advice in telling people to be confident, respectful, and seek the elders’ advice. This feature reveals innovation in song composition. The verse that expresses this advice resembles the Malay *pantun* from another verse in the Rasa Sayang song. The *pantun* is divided into two lines of *pembayang* (shadowing the meaning); followed by another two lines known as *makna* (meaning). Beginning from the seventh line, this song also takes *pantun* form. An example of the *pantun* format is illustrated below:

\[\begin{array}{l}
\text{1}^{\text{st}} \text{ and } 2^{\text{nd}} \text{ line: } \text{pembayang (shadow)} \\
\text{3}^{\text{rd}} \text{ and } 4^{\text{th}} \text{ line: } \text{makna (meaning)} \\
\end{array}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malay Language</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Malay Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buah cempedak di luar pagar</td>
<td>The cempedak fruit outside the fence</td>
<td>pembayang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambil galah tolong jolokkan</td>
<td>Bring a stick to pull it down</td>
<td>(shadow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saya budak baru belajar</td>
<td>I am a new student learning</td>
<td>makna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalau salah tolong tunjukkan</td>
<td>If I make mistakes, please correct me</td>
<td>(meaning)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{110} Information from this section is based on my experience living, cooking, and interacting with Julida Uju and Gali Adam’s family from February to August 2009.
**Laguk Titik Musang** *(Song of the Civet Cat)*

... *Tau' gage belanak kawah*  
*Nakeh tau' temai mengge' temai*  
*So' Jugra so' bertuah*  
*Nakeh gelah Sialang do gandek Sialang*  
*Niat ede' layuk*  
*Batang pinang nale, daun nale*  
*Ede' segan ede' maluk*  
*Bile senang kele esok hal kele*  

... The vegetable gage, the grey mullet in the trap  
That us the vegetable of our ancestors long ago  
The Jugra Hill is a luck-bearing hill  
That is called the Salang, the river Salang  
Pray that we don’t fall ill  
The trunk of the areca nut, cassava, the leaf *ngale*  
Don’t feel inhibited, don’t feel shy  
One would achieve contentment but that’s a future matter  
Paddle the lightwood boat  
The young attap leaves weave, mother weaves  
Salutations to you mister, salutations to you sir  
If you are wrong, correct us, please correct us.

(ibid.: 247-248)

**Nature Songs**

*Laguk Gemah Lebat* *(Song of the Heavy Rain)*

This song describes mangrove rainforest life. Catching *ketab tipak* *(ghost crabs)*\(^{111}\) for sale, boiling seaweed, marinating fish for cooking, and chopping *bakau* (mangrove) wood for firewood are described in the song. These retained features demonstrate continuity in song texts expression. In addition, innovative features include the description of domestic village cooking activities, such as stuffing of cassava, bamboo, and sago.

\(^{111}\) Small brightly colored mangrove crab of the species *sesama* (Karim 1982, 241). Also known as ghost crabs.
Laguk Gemah Lebat (Song of Heavy Rain)

‘Kelechok’, ketab tipak
Lo’ tuntung nale, isik leh nale
Chok bakau keret kechamppak
Nelok lanteng wakle kob wakle
Ka chukak saguk miye
Po-oh hagar tepik bebe
Hentot mai ka-ai belayar

Ngoi tepes tekohe tepes
Hutang mai kob bayar
Hutang budik kebe, ka-ai kebes

Itek dengut balam-balam

Ka tandah Lamat di Tanjung Kelamat
Enchik yut angkat salam
Nakeh tandah Lamat, biar selamat

Po-oh hagar tepik bebe
Peleh ludat payak, lenak payak
Laguk jo’oh eheh kabel
Laguk moden punyak ma’asi’ punyak
(ibid., 241-242)

‘Kelechok’, -- the tipak crab falls
The bamboo and cassava, stuff the cassava in it
One goes to the mangroves only to fall
Before obtaining firewood, before obtain firewood
Marinate the fish and scrap the sago
Boil the seaweed at the riverside
The golden variety banana is transported by sea
The ginger-plant is shipped, the ginger plant
A debt of gold can be repaid
But a good turn is remembered till death, remembered till death
The duck bobs now out of sight and now in view
The tandah fish from Lamat, Kelamat Promontory
As you leave sir, we give you salutations
That is the sign for a safe journey, let it be a safe journey
Boil the seaweed at the riverside
The ludat fruit has hit the ground
The jo’oh songs are our own creation
The modern songs belong to others, belong to others.

Lines 7-10 of the Heavy Rain Song resemble a popular verse in the Malay pantun (poem), also sung to the famous “Rasa Sayang Eh” tune. Below is another excerpt from a verse in the Rasa Sayang Song.

Pisang emas dibawa berlayar
Masak sebiji di atas peti
Hutang emas boleh di bayar
Hutang budi di bawa mati

The emas banana is set to sail
One ripens above the casket
A debt of gold can be repaid
A debt of deed owed a life

Line 12 and 13 of Laguk Gemah Lebat names two animals: the duck and the ka tandah, identified as a freshwater fish by Karim (1981, 242). It also names the place Tanjong Kelamat, known today as Tanjong Keramat, located on the peninsula
near the burial sites of the Mah Meri ancestors, and visible from the island. According to Che Yah, it is sacred and has a guardian protector named Moyang Keramat. A pangar (altar) was built at Tanjong Keramat for Moyang Keramat (guardian spirit of Tanjong Keramat) (Che Yah, pers. comm., February 12, 2009).

Another interesting innovative aspect of this song is the salutation made to an “encik,” a title Malays use to address an elderly or respected person such as a schoolteacher. The appearance of these salutations may be due to the emergence of JHEOA Malay officers who are in charge of the organization of the Mah Meri villages; or could they be salutations for tourists, researchers, or visiting scholars. The last two lines of the song reveal the emergence of identity differentiation. It appears that the Mah Meri have begun to distinguish between Mah Meri songs and modern songs which they consider not their own.

**Song of Rejected Love**

*Laguk Si-Ooi (Song of the Coppersmith Barbet)*

Although this song is named after a bird, the text describes other forest animals such as the frog, and plants, including *chamai* (betel nut), *maman* (wild fruit), and *chamai gasik* (wild betel-vine). The song’s central theme is rejected love, a fairly new feature addressed by the Mah Meri. This song also shows that the titles of songs do not necessarily reveal their contents, and also problematizes the use of taxonomy in determining content. According to Karim (1981, 113), the Si-Ooi song is

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112 During the 1970s, JHEOA had already brought musicians and singers—namely Ahmad Kassim, Mijah Sakit, Unyan Awas, Samah Seman and many others—to perform for official tourism programs and competitions.

113 *Megalaima haemacephala indica* (Karim 1981, 42)
sung when one experiences all types of rejection ranging from male-female love to parental love. A child would cry out singing the Si-Ooi song when it gets a scolding from its parents. This song demonstrates the use of the vocables “dinang dinang,” a lulling soothing vocable adapted to any tune. The traditional use of vocables that mimick sounds of animals have been modified to a nonsense vocable. This is apparent in Lagu Jaboi and Lagu Ganding of the early 2000s, discussed in the next chapter. They are two popular songs performed for tourists.

**Laguk Si-Ooi**
*(Song of the Coppersmith Barbet)*

...Dinang dinang dinang dinang ai
‘Kua’-kua’ hantuk batuk
Peleh leh maman chamai gasik ai
‘Uwa’—Uwa’, eru’ katak ai
Ede’ kenang temai kenang temai ai
Ee, ai ...

...Dinang dinang dinang dinang ai
Ah eksek gak!
Ma’ hagah ngot heh liau
Malum leh heh bajau ai
Hinkik sudik ngot ada’ memang ai

Kaluk sudik ngot’ Tanya lah heh ai

Hinkik timbul ngot
Ai manik pin?

(ibid., 238-240)
**Summary**

Table 4.1 summarizes continuity and change in themes, form, and other features of the songs of the early 1900s and late 1900s.

**Table 4.0 Thematic and form differences: Song Texts of Early 1900s and Late 1900s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early 1900s</th>
<th>Late 1900s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>Native Flora and Fauna</td>
<td>Cultivated Plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supernatural</td>
<td>Domesticated Animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Place names</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical Features of Animals</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioral Traits of Animals</td>
<td>Moyang (Ancestral Spirits)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Contact</td>
<td>Values of adat (custom)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communal Living</td>
<td>Advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feasting</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Form</strong></td>
<td>Through-composed</td>
<td>Identity Differentiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asymmetrical</td>
<td>Addressing Authority or Tourists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Features</strong></td>
<td>Monothematic</td>
<td>Multi-thematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content of Song Correlate with Taxonomy (title)</td>
<td>Content of Song Less Related to Taxonomy (title)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The content of Mah Meri songs from the late 1900s show a decline in the naming of places, description of native flora, and the description of the physical features and behavioral traits of animals. This suggests changes in ecological surroundings and Mah Meri subsistence. The deforestation of mangrove and lowland rainforests led to the extinction of many native flora and fauna. The Mah Meri changing role from nomadic sea people and hunter-gatherers to wageworkers and sedentary agriculturalists caused a reduction in their intimacy with the flora and fauna of the forest. More cultivated plants and domestic animals were named as food sources or items of commercial value. Innovations include the mention of
bananas, cassava, sugar cane, cashew nuts, areca nuts, sago, *kejel* (sweet potato), *rambai*, rambutan and durian. However earlier forest products, such as *pepat* fruit, *nyireh* tree, and *ludat* fruit are mentioned. Names of endemic fauna such as the *siamang*, the *cheep gunting*, and *tipak* crabs continue to be found even though these animals have been scarce. Mention of *ka tandah* (*tandah fish*) shows that aquaculture already existed during this era. The use of vocables in mimicry of animal sounds continues to perpetuate in songs of the late 1900s.

In the later songs, innovations in song text composition include increased mention of *moyang*, which were less frequent themes in the songs of the early 1900s. The increased belief in guardian spirits that protect the village explains their importance and their representation in woodcarvings, masks, songs and dance. The influence of cultural contact with the Malays is observed through the emergence of *pantun*-like structure, the element of advice, and the focus on love-themes in the song texts of the late 1900s. Advice is based on Mah Meri *adat* (custom), worldviews, concepts of *tulah* (curse) and *kemali* (breach of codes), and systems of reciprocity.

Identity differentiation is seen in the distinction between Mah Meri traditional songs and modern pop songs. The perpetuation of the Main Jo’oh songs is a conscious effort to inspire Mah Meri response to the national policies of

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114 Many of the song texts collected by Mohd Radzi (2003) from two other Mah Meri villages on Carey Island: Kampung Sungai Judah and Kampung Sungai Rambai seem highly influenced by the *pantun* structure and themes of love. The musicians and singers from whom these songs were obtained were Ayun Indu, Zainab Sagap, Daiman Peron dan Miyah Adu from Kampung Sungai Judah. In Kampung Sungai Rambai, songs were collected from Faridah Alang (Mak Datin) and her husband, Batin Dollah. I have personally met and interviewed these musicians but did not collect any songs from them except one song for Faridah Alang, which is structured in *pantun* style. However, the songs in these two eras and those I collected from Kampung Sungai Bumbun do not exemplify this feature.
assimilation and modernization, and the socio-political climate emerging during the late 20th century. The government goal for the Orang Asli is to eventually assimilate them into mainstream Malay society. The promotion of Islam and conversion to it affect Mah Meri ethnic identity, although Christian missionaries also evangelize in many Orang Asli settlements. The construction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), National Cultural Policy (NCP), the “bangsa Malaysia” policy, and the bumiputera policies have begun to affect how the Mah Meri view themselves as a people. The effects of these policies on Mah Meri performing traditions will be discussed in the next few chapters.

The changes observed in the song texts of the two periods reflect the changes in the socio-environmental climate of Kampung Sungai Bumbun. The gradual increase of external influences linked to national and local forces on a village is seen in the song texts. Songs that earlier focused on indigenous flora and fauna began to include cultivated plants in later texts, revealing movement away from dependence on natural resources to a sedentary lifestyle. The decline in naming places across the peninsula as reflected in song texts of the early 2000s suggests a more settled, sedentary community. Fewer descriptions of flora and fauna are due to the rapid deforestation resulting in the extinction of many indigenous animals and plants.

The resemblance of some verses of song texts to Malay pantun is an indication of cultural contact. The multicultural citizens of Malaysia also know the verses mentioned because they derive from the popular tune “Rasa Sayang Eh,” a song, representative of Malaysia. It is sung in schools and for tourists. Ironically, this song does not originate from Malaysia.
The potpourri of themes, compared to the monothematic songs of the earlier period, demonstrates exposure to more local experiences. The through-composed verses show that songs are not completely standardized or structured into a symmetrical system yet. This format of composition, as well as the effects of national policies and globalization are apparent in contemporary song texts, and will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5

THE MUSIC OF THE MAIN JO'OHH: FROM RITUAL ENACTMENT TO STAGE REPRESENTATION

As the tourism industry in Malaysia began proliferating in the 1970s (Kadir 1990); the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA) sought to identify Orang Asli ethnic groups that could perform for national and local tourism events underscore Malaysia's main tourism thrust to portray a multi-cultural Malaysia. Rosiah Kengkeng, in her 40s, believes that Kampung Sungai Bumbun became popular in the tourism industry during the 80s (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009) Through JHEOA, visitors were brought to Kampung Sungai Bumbun, one of the main tourist destinations among other Mah Meri settlements. Mah Meri were also solicited to perform beyond the village.115 Gendoi Ranggun states:

... during that time, Ahmad Kassim always performed outside the village. Ahmad Kassim, Hussein, Ali, and Hassan... They went to Malacca, Shah Alam and even Terengganu (Ranggun Semen, pers. comm., April 22, 2009).

This chapter focuses on comparing the melody, rhythm, texture, and form of the Main Jo'oh during the late 1900s and early 2000s. As Mah Meri perform for tourists, they inadvertently reproduce the Main Jo'oh for the tourist gaze. I utilize tourism and globalization theories to understand the Mah Meri choices for retaining,

115 In 1977, the Mah Meri became the champion to a “Sewang Competition,” (sewang: general term for healing ceremony or festive celebration among Orang Asli) organized by JHEOA. The head of the group was the late Ahmad Kassim, Mijah Sakit, Unyan Awas and Usoi Awas. After championing this competition, the Mah Meri musical troupe of Kampung Sungai Bumbun was invited to perform in Fraser Hill, Genting Highlands, Penang and Johore (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009).
eliminating, and innovating the music. I argue that Mah Meri interactions with tourists flowing in and out of the village have inevitably led to restructuring of the music of the Main Jo’oh. Urry refers to these movements of people as “liquidities” and discusses their impact on tourists and hosts:

... the relations between almost all societies across the globe are mediated by flows of tourists, as place after place is reconfigured as a recipient of such flows. There is an omnivorous producing and ‘consuming [of] place’ from around the globe. (Urry 1995)

**Sources of musical recordings**

There are no musical recordings or transcriptions of Mah Meri music in the early 1900s. Skeat and Blagden described Mah Meri music in the early 1900s as:

>The songs chanted on these occasions are generally rude improvisations, consisting of certain well-known and continually recurring phrases. The tunes sung to are very simple and quaint. These are generally mere chants of three or four notes only, but yet have a weird kind of melody of their own, and are sung with a wonderful spirit and verve, which prevents them from becoming tedious. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 145-146)

In tracing continuity and change, I compare Skeat and Blagden’s description of the singing of the early 1900s to the music of the late 1900s and early 2000s. The earliest musical recording of Mah Meri songs I could find to date is Kampat and Labos Song,\(^{116}\) which were recorded during the late 1900s by Asyik FM, the National Orang Asli radio station. Their exact origins are unknown, but it is highly possible the songs are from Kampung Sungai Bumbun, because the Labos Song is named after the spirit Jaboi, who is specifically related to this village.

\(^{116}\) Labos was the title written on the CD recording provided by Mahat Cina, a radio DJ from Asyik FM provided me these recordings in August 2009.
During my ethographic fieldwork in 2009, I recorded nine unpublished contemporary songs and two instrumental pieces from the Main Jo’oh troupe (specifically the Sungai Mata opoh of Kampung Sungai Bumbun). Their music was inherited from the troupe’s moyang (ancestor), the late Unyan Awas and his wife, Samah Seman. Among the recordings, ten songs were adaptations from Unyan Awas. Zainuddin Unyan, the troupe’s current jule player, composed the music and text to the eleventh song, “Ari Moyang Song” in 2009.

I use Tan and Matusky’s taxonomy to describe Mah Meri music—as consisting of three layers of sound framed by a colotomic unit (which is usually the time-marker). I find their guidelines very relevant and useful for describing Mah Meri music. I use Matusky and Tan’s concept of texture to analyze the combination of various layers of instrumentation in Mah Meri music to produces a resultant sound.

A piece usually consists of several unique strata of sound: a melodic layer that is sung and played heterophonically with a melody instrument; a rhythmic layer with a specific pattern played in an interlocking style by drums; and the gong unit or colotomic layer played by bronze instruments. (Tan and Matusky, 2004, 11)

I utilize the same format in my discussion of the Main Jo’oh musical style of the early 2000s (contemporary Main Jo’oh music).

1. Melody (singer) and ornamented melody (jule player)
2. Rhythmic pattern: Tambo (double headed drum)
3. Time marker: Tungtung (bamboo stamping tubes)
Songs of the Late 1900s

Structural tones form the core melody and the basic unornamented melodic phrases in Labos and Kampat Song of the late 1900s. They have their origins in the “three or four note” chants described by Skeat and Blagden in the early 1900s. This melodic style was prominent in the vocal styles of the Labos and Kampat Song (late 1900s) and is vaguely retained in the contemporary (early 2000s) Jaboi and Tok Naning Song. Traces of the three to four note chant are heard in the vocal line, which consists of a melodic motive ranging from three to five tones. In addition, the jule (violin) performs virtuosic florid, running passages. It also introduces additional chromatic tones and expands to a wider soundscape as compared to the three to four tone chants of the early 1900s.

Structural tones play a function similar to those of the balungan (core melody) and bunga (florid patterns) in Joget Gamelan, the first form of Malaysian gamelan music found in the courts of Pahang (D’ Cruz 1979). This texture is also used in wayang kulit Kelantan (Matusky 2004, 25) and makyong (ibid., 35) in Kelantan. The balungan is the core melody in Javanese Gamelan (Kunst 1973, Hood 1954, Sumarsam 1984), while it is known as bulungan in the gamelan and the organizing principle for baat in Sulu (Trimillos 1972). However, there are some differences between the balungan and bunga patterns in the gamelan and Kampat song described here. Unlike the gamelan in which the balungan and bunga are played simultaneously, the Mah Meri practice allows the jule to play the florid passages based on the structural tones independently as an instrumental solo, or as
an accompaniment to the singer’s main melodic phrases. The two songs, Kampat and Labos Song provide evidence for such structural organization.

In the next section, I will analyze the musical elements of Kampat Song, and compare Labos Song (the contemporary name of Jaboi) to the contemporary Jaboi Song (early 2000s).

**Kampat Song**

The singer sings the structural tones in Kampat Song while the *jule* plays variations of the singer’s melodic phrases, embellishing them with passing notes or neighboring tones. The *jule* plays these florid passages as a separate instrumental solo and occasionally overlaps in slight heterophony with the singer’s main structural tones. When they overlap, the *jule* player is careful to maintain a lower volume in order not to overshadow the singer’s voice. The function of the song is to provide a space for the *jule* and singer to demonstrate their virtuosity.

**Form**

The musical form of the earlier period is characterized by a loose alternation between singer and *jule* player. The form of the Kampat song based on instrumentation is A B C A1 B1 C1.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td><em>Jule</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td><em>Jule</em> and vocals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Vocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td><em>Jule</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Jule and vocals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Vocal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The *jule* demonstrates his virtuosity through melodic improvisations, while the singer expresses virtuosity through her improvisation of song text.\textsuperscript{117} The Kampat Song presents three main sections—1) the *jule* instrumental solo and 2) the *jule* and vocals— the *jule* plays in heterophony and sometimes in a skeletal accompaniment to the singer 3) vocal solo. One of the prominent features in the Kampat Song is the division of melodic patterns into upper and lower registers, a also style used in gamelan playing in Malaysia. The singer utilizes the upper and lower register of the pitch inventory. The *jule* uses more of the upper register in its accompaniment than the lower register.

The *jule* solo plays a florid melody in heterophony with the singer’s structural tones, ornamenting them with neighboring and passing tones in the introduction. However, these heterophonic passages are separated from the singer’s entries. In cases where the *jule* and singer overlap, the *jule* either plays in unison, octave displacements (bars 8-10, 13-17) or subtle heterophony with the singer’s main melodic phrases (bar 7, 12, 18, 19) (See Example 3.1.1). Although the variation is slight, I consider it to be heterophony because there is still variation in the *jule* line when compared with the singer’s melody.

This form is possibly the result of the song-debate improvisations spontaneously created by musicians and singers during celebrative festivals. The *jule* players were important virtuosic performers, well-known for their florid, ornamented melodies. The singers played an equal role, if not more important. They

\textsuperscript{117} I obtained these recordings from Mahat Cina after I finished fieldwork. I was not able to transcribe the song texts because the words in the both Kampat Song and Labos Song were not very clear and I was away from my informants.
sang simpler melodies, as their virtuosity derived from their ability to improvise
song texts. Nevertheless, although the *jule* player and singer perform in
heterophony at B1, this texture thins out when the *jule* is merely accompanying the
singer softly, allowing her to demonstrate her singing skills and witty song text.
Voice sometimes alternates and sometimes are heard together.

**Melody**

The singer utilizes four structural tones in each register, upper and lower
(Example 3.1.2). The lower register cadences on Eb4, one of the structural tones. In
the upper register, another four structural tones are used (two of the structural
tones are octave displacements, C5 & Eb5), and one is the duplication of a tone in
the lower register (G4). The upper register cadences on G4.118

![Example 3.1.1 Kampat Vocal Pitch Inventory](image)

---

118 The actual pitches representing the above pitch inventory approximately C4+ Eb4 F4 G4 Bb4– C5
Eb5. The symbol (−) means slightly lower pitch, while (+) means slightly higher pitch. I obtained
approximate pitches using Sonic Visualiser 2005-2010 software. However, accuracy was not possible
because the vocals were mixed in with all the other instruments since they were not recorded in
separate tracks.
Example 3.1.2  
Kampat Song

\[ \text{transcription: Clare Chan} \]

\[ \text{© Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bambun, Carey Island, Selangor} \]
The following musical example (Example 3.1.3) shows how structural, and cadential tones are organized into melodic phrases in upper (a) and lower (b) registers. Each phrase ends with a cadential tone. The form for the vocal line is: a a b a b a. The characteristic of singing one line of texts twice is observed in this song.

**Example 3.1.3    Kampat Vocal Line**

The *jule* utilizes nine structural tones combined into an upper and lower register (Example 3.14). In the lower register (a), five structural tones (on one of which the section cadences) are used. The lower register cadences on Eb4. In the upper register (b), four structural tones are used. The upper register cadences on G4.
Example 3.1.5 shows how the tones are organized into melodic phrases. The *jule* embellishes the structural tones in the upper and lower register with ornamented patterns of neighbor tones and passing notes set to varied rhythmic patterns including dotted notes (bar 1-4), tuplets (bar 5, 63), and appoggiaturas (bars 59, 66). I speculate that the florid patterns of the *jule* came from an influence either of ancestral Senoi vocal style of singing (Roseman 1991) or Arabic cantillations prominent in the southern coasts of Malacca. Karim (1981) describes the heterophonic plucking of the *banjeng* during séances in the 70s, and this heterophonic style may have entered into *jule* playing aesthetics and practices.
Example 3.1.5  Kampat *Jule Line*

ST Structural Tones  CT Cadential Tones  NT Neighboring Tones  PT Passing Tones
Rhythm and Time-marker

The *tambo* plays a combination of onbeat and offbeat patterns, using contrasting timbres that give a syncopated feel to the music. In Kampat Song, the *tambo* maintains the colotomic structure of the song by accenting the first beat of the duple-metered measures. This marking of the beat is clearly audible from bars 25-42.

A pair of *tungtung* of different lengths is struck in alternation onto a thick piece of wood. The first beat of the duple meter is often emphasized. The *tungtung* changes patterns of alternation at cadential points. Although it appears to function as the time marker at the beginning of the piece, it soon begins to appear sparsely (bars 44-62). The next song presents similar characteristics, however the upper and lower registers are more clearly divided into two sections, each ending in a cadence.

**Labos Song**

The Labos Song is an older version of the contemporary Jaboi Song. In the next section, I will compare and contrast the two versions. The musical instruments that accompany this song are the *jule, tungtung*¹¹⁹ and *tambo*.

⁰¹¹⁹ I have a dilemma in identifying this sound, which may be interpreted as bamboo stamping tubes (*tungtung*) or the wooden xylophone (*ginggong*). I chose to identify it as a *tungtung* because of its regular description in Mah Meri literature and the two high-low pitches limit in this song.
Form

The form of the song is based on the lines of the *jule* and those of the singer. I suggest that the length of sections in this performance was flexible and depended on signals between the two musicians (Example 3.2.1).

A  *jule* player  
B  *jule* player (skeletal accompaniment) and singer  
A1  *jule* player  
B1  *jule* player (skeletal accompaniment)  
A2  *jule* player

Form is created by the interaction between the *jule* player and the singer.

The division of measures between the *jule* and singer is uneven due to the improvisational nature of the music. This example shows the singer’s melodic patterns in both upper and lower registers, characterized by only slight changes in rhythm. The *jule* melodic patterns however are highly ornamented with neighboring and passing tones, generally with no exact repetition.

Although there is structure to this song, it is not rigid. There is much room for virtuosic improvisation, spontaneity and embellishment. The song is structured in two ways: upper and lower register melodic patterns with a different cadential tone for each register. The *jule* line and the vocal line interact, moving apart and then meeting at these cadential points. The character of the Labos song demonstrates the highly virtuosic skills of the *jule* player. The singer sings with a nasal, tight and coarse sound, characteristic of Mah Meri singing during this era.
Example 3.2.1  Labos Song

Transcription: Clare Chan

Jule Instrumental

Jule

Vocalist

Tambo

Tungtung

Jule

Voc.

Tamb.

Tung.

©Mak Meri of Kampung Sungai Bambun, Carey Island, Selangor
Lagu Laboos

A1

B1

Vocals re-entry
0:56min
Jule Instrumental
1:16min

A2

Jule

Voc.

Tamb.

Tung.

Jule

Voc.

Tamb.

Tung.
The singer utilizes structural tones and some neighboring tones in melodic patterns divided into an upper and lower register (Example 3.2.2). In the upper register, two structural tones (one is the cadential tone) and a neighboring tone are used. In the lower register, three structural tones (including the cadential tone), and a neighboring tone are used. The combined pitch inventory\textsuperscript{120} of both registers includes four structural tones and two neighboring tones, which are, in fact, octave duplications of two of the structural tones.

\textsuperscript{120} The actual pitch value of all the these tones are C4– E4– G4– B4– D5– E5+
The limited number of pitches sung by the singer affirms Skeat and Blagden's description of the music of the Mah Meri in the early 1900s, as “three to four note chants” (Skeat and Blagden 1906: 145-146). The following transcription of Example 3.2.3 shows how structural, neighboring, and cadential tones are organized into melodic phrases in upper (a) and lower (b) registers. Each phrase ends with a cadential tone. The form for the vocal line is: 1) a b b 2) a a b b. The characteristic of singing one line of texts twice is observed in this song.

Example 3.2.3  Labos Vocal Line

ST Structural tones  NT Neighboring tones  CT Cadential tones
The *jule* player utilizes the same four structural tones, and the higher and lower registers (Example 3.2.4) but embellish these tones with passing notes, some of which are chromatic.

**Example 3.2.4**  **Labos *Jule* Pitch Inventory**

The following Example (Example 3.2.5) shows how the tones are organized into melodic phrases based on upper (a) and lower registers (b). The form for the *jule* line (A)

A :  \[\begin{array}{cccc}
  a & a' & b & a'' \\
  a' & c & & \\
  \end{array}\]

A1:  \[\begin{array}{c}
  a' \\
  a' \ c \\
  \end{array}\]

A2:  \[\begin{array}{c}
  a' \ b' \ b'' \\
  \end{array}\]

The *jule* embellishes the structural tones in the upper and lower register with ornamented patterns of neighbor tones and passing notes set to varied rhythmic patterns including dotted notes (bar 2-4), turns (bar 5, 6, 7, 11 etc.) tuplets (bars 6, 10 etc.) and appoggiaturas (bars 13, 14 etc.)(Example 3.2.4).
Example 3.2.5  Labos *Jule* Line

\[ \text{\textbf{Jule Instrumental}} \]
Interaction between *Jule* and Singer

The *jule* player and singer play together in heterophony at the entry of the singer (bar 27-30, Example 3.2.6). While the singer uses the structural and neighboring tones of the upper register (bars 27-31), the *jule* player ornaments the upper register tones with neighboring and passing notes in varied rhythmic patterns. The players again meet in unison at a cadence (bar 30). In the lower register (bars 32-38), the *jule* player diminishes in volume, allowing the vocal line to dominate. He plays sustained tones in unison or at an interval of a third with the voice ending in unison at the cadence.

**Example 3.2.6  Labos *Jule* and Vocal Line**
Rhythmic Patterns and Time-marker

The *tambo* plays a combination of on and offbeat patterns of contrasting timbres,\(^\text{121}\) giving a syncopated feel to the performance. Selected *tambo* patterns appear in Example 3.2.7. The typical rhythmic pattern signifying the approach to the cadence in either upper or lower register is shown in bar 1 and bar 2.

![Example 3.2.7 Labos Tambo Rhythms](image)

As in Kampat Song, the *tungtung* (bamboo stamping tubes) play only two pitches, alternating low-high with a longer and shorter bamboo stamping tube, which changes pitch directions (indicated by X, Example 3.1.1 and 3.2.6) at places that often end with the cadential tone. They maintain a steady beat, while varying the texture through the alternating pitches. Thus the *tungtung* frames the colotomic unit in the song.

The *tambo* plays a combination of onbeat and offbeat patterns, creating a syncopated pattern of drumming. The *tungtung* alternates between a low and high pitch, creating a density referent.

---

\(^{121}\) The mnemonics for the timbres played but the *tambo* is *dung* and *tak*. The *dung* sound is located at the periphery (rim) of the *tambo*, while the *tak* sound is produced by spreading the fingers out to strike the center of the *tambo*.
Summary: Songs of the late 1900s

It is hard to decipher the origins of the florid patterns played by the jule. I suggest two possibilities. Karim (1981) describes the singing and plucking of the banjeng instruments during healing ceremonies where the shaman’s singing is accompanied by the simultaneous strumming on the banjeng by his wife and son as: “generally, the arrangement of the music is heterophonic in the sense that the two players attempt to intensify the same notes but without deliberately aiming at simultaneity” Karim (1981: 180-181). The description that singers emphasize similar tones but not in unison shows that singing in heterophony is not foreign to the Mah Meri. Besides this, Roseman’s (1991) recording of Temiar (another Austroasiatic/ Senoi group) healing songs exemplifies ascending and descending ornamented conjunct melodies. There is possibility that the florid patterns played on the jule might also be derived from indigenous origins already present among the people.

Besides ascribing an origin of indigeneity to the Orang Asli music, the florid patterns played by the jule have some semblance to the melodic patterns of Arabic cantillations originating from the Middle East. However, even so, it is clear that the Mah Meri do not play the Augmented 2nd or Augmented 4th intervals prominent in Middle East traditions. The jule plays chromatic tones that ascend and descend only to return to a cadential tone. Therefore, although this Main Jo’oh music has been said the resemble ronggeng or joget music, the Mah Meri choices for tonal production vary.
Contemporary Songs (Early 2000s)

I recorded and transcribed nine unpublished contemporary songs and two instrumental pieces from my fieldwork in 2009. I have divided these songs into two genres: the jo’oh-style songs and the joget-style songs. The main difference between the music of these two genres is the “three against two” rhythmic pattern characteristic of the joget-style songs. This contrast is seen in the interaction between the jule player and singer. Second, the jo’oh songs are simpler in their tonal pitch inventories, while in the joget-style songs, the basic tones are embellished with chromatic tones, specifically a flat 3, sharp 4 and flat 7.

Lagu Jaboi (Jaboi Song)

The Jaboi Song is the contemporary version of the Labos song. It is the only contemporary song where the jule and vocal line alternate consistently with each other, a feature that shows some continuity from the past. The rest of the contemporary songs have fewer alternating sections. This song is currently one of the main songs performed during shows to represent Mah Meri identity. Compared with the older Labos song, there are slight changes in the interaction between the jule and vocal line, melodic materials, rhythm, time-marking beats, texture, and form of the song.

Texture

The music of Jaboi Song consists of three layers: melody, rhythm, and time-marker. The singer sings the melody and the jule player plays on the ornamented melody. The tambo and banjeng (plucked bamboo zither) play the percussive
rhythm patterns, and the *tawak* (knobbed gong) marks the colotomic units, while also functioning as the time-marker.

**Form**

The form of the song is A B A B . . . (see table below). Unlike the Labos song, the *jule* instrumental interlude and verses (strophic form) consists of the same number of bars (except during the *jule* introduction and coda) during each alternation, in which the *jule* player (A) plays in heterophony with the singer (B). The *jule* begins with an instrumental solo, followed by the singing of vocables, and the entry of the first verse thereafter. After each verse, the singer pauses for a *jule* interlude. The song ends with the singing of vocables and concludes after an instrumental coda by the *jule* (See Appendices for full score).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jaboi Song (<em>Jo'oh</em>-style song)</th>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Minute</th>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>No of bars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A (intro. &amp; vocables)</td>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>1-31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B (Verse 1)</td>
<td>00:43</td>
<td>32-63</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>01:25</td>
<td>64-75</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B (Verse 2)</td>
<td>01:41</td>
<td>76-107</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>02:23</td>
<td>108-119</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B (Verse 3)</td>
<td>02:38</td>
<td>120-151</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>03:20</td>
<td>152-163</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B (Verse 4)</td>
<td>03:36</td>
<td>164-195</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>04:18</td>
<td>196-211</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A (Coda)</td>
<td>04:57</td>
<td>212-253</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A  *Jule* Instrumental  B  Voice & *Jule*
Example 3.3.1  Jaboi Song

Jo-oh Styled

Lyrics:
Maznah Unyant
Samah Seman

Transcription:
Clare Chan

©Mah Meri Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island
Melody

The vocal melody primarily utilizes in total four tones in the upper and lower registers (see pitch inventory, Example 3.3.2). The fifth tone is an octave displacement. The upper register melody consists of three structural tones and one of which is a cadential tone. The lower register also uses three structural tones, of which one is a cadential tone.

Example 3.3.2 Jaboi Vocal Line Pitch Inventory

Example 3.3.3 shows how the pitches are organized into melodic patterns. These melodic patterns are subdivided into phrases based on upper (a) and lower (b) registers, each phrase ending in a cadence tone. The form for the vocal line (B) is: a b a b. In general, the singer sings in syllabic style in the Jaboi Song. However, the singer ends some phrases in the verses by prolonging the last syllable with a tremolo (see bars 3, 4, 18 and 20). Sometimes, she uses a descending portamento (bar 22) for the same purpose. The characteristic of singing one line twice is retained.

\[122\]

\[122\]The actual pitches shown on the pitch inventory are C#4+ E+ G#4+ B4+ C#. I stopped examining exact pitches after Jaboi Song because it is not the focus of this dissertation. Also, the pitches I notated do not fall too far out of the pitches I obtained from Sonic Visualiser.
Since song texts are composed to inherited traditional melodies, an “e” vowel is added when a sentence does not end together with the melodic line (bar 27 and 31). The main word is *hae*, which means “people” but an “e” is inserted before to synchronize words and melody. These additions are common among indigenous songs, as Merriam (1964: 188) notes, “Music also influences language in that musical requirements demand alterations in the patterns of normal speech.” Thus vowels may be inserted, elided, or altered, or an extra syllable may be added to a word.

**Example 3.3.3 Jaboi Vocal Line**

![Jaboi Vocal Line](image)
Ornamented Melody (*Jule*)

The *jule* melody uses the same structural tones as the voice, as well as an upper and a lower register (Example 3.3.4). However, the *jule* melodies are embellished with more neighboring and passing tones on weaker beats and offbeat (Example 3.3.5).

**Example 3.3.4**  *Jaboi Jule Pitch Inventory*

The *jule* plays florid patterns, mainly on pitches confined to the fingering patterns of the scale of C in the first position without the use of accidentals probably influenced by classical violin tuning. These melodies are set to varied rhythmic patterns that tend to repeat or ascend for the first beats of the bar and descend for the second beats of the bar. Although the embellishment consists neighboring tones and passing tones, the *jule* line cadences in unison with the song (Example 3.3.5).
Utilizing varied rhythmic patterns, the jule player embellishes the structural tones in major 3rd leaps (bars 33, 41, 45) and minor 3rd drops on the second beat of the bar (bars 32, 36, 37 etc.). Pitches ascending stepwise on the first beat of the bar (bars 32, 36, 40) and descending turns on the second beat of the bar (bar 34, 42, 46 etc.) to form these florid patterns.

Besides this, the jule player tends to brush the bow on an adjacent string, creating a 5th above the cadence tone (bars 35, 39, 43) (common in folk fiddle playing). This double stops technique on open strings was not used in the Labos Song, which used faster running melodic passages combined with specific rhythmic motifs. I posit that this technique may have emerged because of the traditional 5th interval tuning. Perhaps this affect worked better with the Jaboi Song rhythmic motifs, which are slower and less florid than Labos Song.
Rhythmic Patterns and Time-marker

Unlike the combination of onbeat and offbeat patterns played by the tambo in the Labos Song, the tambo player in the Jaboi Song plays a downbeat rhythm combining two timbres (dung tak) into a rhythmic pattern. This same rhythm is used by the tungtung which produces a higher (kentot) and a lower (gende) pitch, corresponding with the short and longer bamboo tubes. Very minute variations are
made at some points of the piece but they are not significant enough for further discussion.

The banjeng (bamboo zither) player adds interlocking patterns. It uses two timbres, mnemonic timbres, zhang and ching. A syncopated rhythm is produced through the strumming of the banjeng on all three strings. The strumming patterns meet the melody at cadential points in the song, but unclear audio especially when the vocal and jule player are performing, makes it hard to distinguish these patterns. Nevertheless, the banjeng replaces the function of the tambo interlocking patterns in Labos Song.

The tawak consistently marks the first beat of every bar in Jaboi Song, which is in duple meter. It marks the colotomic units in this song.

**Comparative Characteristics between Labos (Late 1900s) and Jaboi Song (Early 2000s)**

A comparison of the Labos Song and Jaboi Song show that there is change, yet continuity. The four-tone melodies, use of an upper and lower register, the cadences, and the repetition of motifs is similar. However, at some of the cadences in the Jaboi Song, the singer uses tremolos and descending portamento. This is not present in the Labos Song. The singers in both Labos and Jaboi Song retained the use of a nasal, coarse voice quality, the former being more pronounced.

Change also occurs in the texture between the jule player and singer. The florid embellishments of the jule in the former have become a somewhat formal instrumental interlude in Jaboi Song, instead of serving as a space for demonstrating
virtuosity, as in the Labos Song. The jule plays in heterophony with the vocal line in the Jaboi Song, unlike the separate florid and ornamented patterns of the jule in Labos Song. A denser texture, more “ensemble-like,” compared to a more linear texture of alternation between the jule player and singer occurs in Jaboi Song.

The loosely structured as A B A1 B1 A2 form of the Labos Song is replaced by a strophic form A B A B, with an additional jule interlude and vocables to begin and end in the Jaboi Song. The jule player in the Labos song embellishes it with very florid, fast passages of turns, tuplets and close chromatic pitches that rise and fall. The jule player in contemporary Jaboi Song uses a larger octave range for his ornamentation, such as descending turns, minor 3rd intervals, and stepwise ascending pitches.

I posit that the emergence of more rigid forms of jule playing due to the resignification of the Main Jo’oh from the function of improvisation and spontaneity in festivals to a performance for tourists. This resignification affects structure, timing of performance, repertoire preparation, and synchronization between musicians and dancers (Anderson 1983). The performance value of creating a cultural production that is short, exciting, dynamic, and compact encourages organization, symmetry and structure is shaped by the characteristics of for the “society of the spectacle” (Debord 1995). Debord’s society of the spectacle "arrogates everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state so as to possess it in a congealed form”—the commodity (ibid., 137).
The colotomic unit is more pronounced in the Jaboi Song. The tawak emphasizes the first beat of the duple meter of Jaboi Song. I reason that the syncopated rhythm created by the tambo player disappeared for social reasons. Using the musicians in the opoh (extended family) is an unspoken though expected political choice for the selection of musicians and dancers. The Kampung Sungai Mata opoh (the late Unyan Awas’ extended family) maintains the rights to his songs, even though any village member may perform these traditional songs. Limiting musicians to those in the opoh resulted in the tambo being played by a female with little experience. Prior to this a male played the tambo, and the villagers spoke of the wonderful drummers of the past.

Recently, the Mah Meri received a new tawak\textsuperscript{123} as a gift from an outsider after they had lost their gong to another section of the extended family during a dispute over payment division after a performance. Although this does not explain why the tawak was not present in the music of the late 1900s, but had been present during the early 1900s, it shows that changes in instrumentation and performance style can also be influenced by the social-political climate in the village.

\textit{Jo’oh-style Songs}

In the following, I will examine the other Mah Meri jo’oh and joget songs I recorded and transcribed in 2009. Besides, the “three-against-two” rhythm, I intend to examine in detail whether there are other reasons to why Mah Meri classify these as jo’oh and joget songs. Additionally, I am interested in examining whether

\textsuperscript{123} Colin Nicholas, an Orang Asli activist managed to find them a gong that they liked. It was from Sarawak.
exposure to a more localized and globalized soundscape, especially after 1985 (when the bridge connecting Carey Island and the peninsula was built) has any effect on their music.

The increase in pitch inventory of the singer (including tones not merely used for ornamentation) in the songs has led me to examine these extra tones as part of the melody of the song rather than resuming the structural and ornamented tone analysis format. I posit the jule or perhaps the composition of the music by the jule player (the late Unyan Awas) as having direct influence on the increased pitch vocabulary of the singer. However, even so, traces of this style can still be identified in the some contemporary songs, such as the Tok Naning Song.

**Tok Naning Song**

The Tok Naning Song is considered one of the more traditional songs, and it is categorized as jo’oh style music. This song is generally performed at 93 beats to a minute, slower than all the other songs. It is lyrical, light, and mellow. Similar to the Labos and the Jaboi song, Tok Naning song has two melodic patterns, one for the upper and one for the lower registers.

There are three layers of sound in the music: melody (core and ornamented melody), rhythmic pattern and time-marker. The singer sings the melody and the jule player plays variation on the melody. The tambo and banjeng play percussive rhythm patterns and the tawak plays the gong units, functioning as the time-marker.
Form

The form of the song is A B A B . . . This piece begins with an instrumental introduction and ends with a coda played by the jule. Although there are four lines to a verse, both singer and jule player sometimes choose to play only two lines. For example, the instrumentalist plays four lines of text (30 bars) in A (intro), while in and A4 (coda), he chooses to play only two lines in bars 14-15. Similarly, the singer performs 4 lines of song text in all verses except in B (verse 2 reprise) (16 bars). Since the third and fourth lines of melody are repeats of the first and second line, the omission is easier. This flexibility reflects the continuity of a culture of spontaneity between the singer and musician, one characteristic of the Mah Meri (see Appendices for full score).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Minute</th>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>No of bars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (Intro)</td>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>1-30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 1)</td>
<td>00:42</td>
<td>31-61</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>01:21</td>
<td>62-76</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 2)</td>
<td>01:41</td>
<td>77-91</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>01:58</td>
<td>92-121</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 1 reprise)</td>
<td>02:38</td>
<td>122-151</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>03:14</td>
<td>152-165</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 2 reprise)</td>
<td>03:33</td>
<td>166-181</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A (Coda)</td>
<td>03:53</td>
<td>182-209</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lagu Tok Naning (Jo’oh-style Songs)

A= jule       B= Voice & jule
Example 3.4.1

Lagu Tok Naning (Tok Naning Song)

[Musical notation image]

B Verse 1
0:42 min
Tok Naning Song
Melody: Vocal Line

The Tok Naning song uses six tones for both the upper and lower registers. The upper register is transposed up fifth from the lower register. The melodic patterns are divided: an upper register (a) and lower register (b), each using six tones. Each register returns to a cadential tone. The examination of structural, neighboring or passing tones ceases here. Possibly influenced by the jule player, and the singer also begun to explore more than the three to four tones of songs in the 1900s. However, some remnants of structural tones heard in the more traditional Main Jo’oh songs, remain.

Example 3.4.2 Tok Naning Pitch Inventory

This piece is in strophic form. In the first verse, the first two lines repeat in lines three and four (aabb). All structural tones used in the Labos and Jaboi songs are found in this song; however, additional tones have also been added. The upper and lower register contrast and return to cadential tones (Example 3.4.1 & 3.4.2). Besides this, the usage of stepwise ascending tones (bar 31, 35, 39, 43), ascending thirds on the first beat of the bar (bars 40, 44) and descending thirds (bars 33, 37,
41, 45) on the second beat is similar to the earlier songs. The continuity of ascending and descending skips of a third is still inherent in the Tok Naning song.

**Example 3.4.3**  
**Tok Naning Vocal Line**

![Tok Naning Vocal Line Example](image)

**Example 3.4.3**  
**Tok Naning Jule and Vocal Line**

![Tok Naning Jule and Vocal Line Example](image)
Ornamented Melody: *Jule* Line

The *jule* line follows the same melodic pattern as that of the voice, in unison and sometimes in heterophony. However, the *jule* player varies the melody by embellishing it using transitional melodies to bridge phrases (bar 38-39, 43-44), and incorporating triplets (37) and double stops (bars 41, 42, and 50).

Rhythmic patterns and Time-marker

The *tungtung* and *tambo* provide the same rhythmic pattern as in the Jaboi Song. The *banjeng* produces offbeat patterns, clearly pronounced in its damped and undamped sounds strummed on open strings. The *tawak* player strikes the knobbed gong on the first beat of the duple meter. However, he doubles this strike at the cadential tones of this piece, for e.g. G4 and C4. In bar 34, the *tawak* doubles his strike on G4, the cadential tone of the upper register of the vocal line. In bar 57, 87 and 91, the *tawak* doubles his strike on C4, the cadential tone of the upper register of the vocal line (Example 3.4.1).

**Kuwang Kuit Song**

The song is slightly slower than the Jaboi Song with a tempo of 95 beats (quarter note) per minute. The *jule* plays a melodic variation with the vocal line melody. This song begins with a *jule* introduction followed by two verses. The style where a *jule* interlude bridges two verses is the basic form of this song— 
A B B A B B ... A *jule* instrumental coda ends the song.
The Kuwang Kuit Song utilizes six tones each for the upper and lower registers. The melodic patterns are divided into two sections, an upper register (a) and lower register (b). The first tone (D4) of the melodic phrase of the lower register is a fourth lower than the upper register (G4) (Example 3.5.2). Some of the tones from both registers overlap each other. Each register cadences on its own.

Compared to Jaboi Song, this song reveals an extension of pitches in both registers.

**Example 3.5.1  Kuwang Kuit Pitch Inventory**
The Kuwang Kuit song differs from the previous jo’oh songs in its use of the P4 interval. In the earlier songs, the melody rose stepwise or in intervals of a third. In this song, there is an interval of a perfect fourth (bar 17-18, 21-22) in the upper and the lower register (bar 25-26, 20-30). The singer uses portamento (bars 24, 40), and appoggiaturas (bars 26, 30, 33) to embellish or fit the song text to the melody. Melisma is used on ka himang (bars 35, 36) and pakat samak (bar 43,44). The “e” vocable on the word dek (dek: don’t) (bar 41,45) is comparatively less utilized in the Kuwang Kuit Song than the Jaboi Song. This may be due to the fact that there are many words in this text. The singer also uses a soothing light and lemak (literally, rich) effect in this song. An outsider told me that the tune of this song derives from the Buai Anak (buai: swing; anak: child) meaning to swing the hammock the baby sleeps in. This may account for its soothing style.
Ornamented Melody: *Jule* Line

The *jule* player plays in unison or slight heterophony with the singer. The *jule* player varies the rhythmic motif using dotted rhythm (bar 28), triplets (bar 26, 30). There is less ornamentation and less use of double stops in the song.

**Example 3.5.3  Kuwang Kuit *Jule* Line**

Rhythmic Pattern and Time-Marker

The texture of Kuwag Kuit Song is similar to that of the previous songs. The *banjeng* creates an offbeat rhythm that interlocks with the onbeat rhythms of the *tambo*. The *tawak* maintains a constant colotomic unit marking every first beat of the duple meter.

**Pera Gunting Song**

The Pera Gunting Song is a traditional *jo’oh* song. In this song, the verses are sung continuously one after the other. The *jule* player plays an instrumental interlude (A) to introduce and end the song. There is only one *jule* instrumental interlude in the song.
The Pera Gunting Song is in strophic form. It utilizes five tones for each of the upper and lower registers. The melodic patterns are divided into two sections, an upper register (a) and lower register (b), each using five tones. Each melodic pattern on both registers return to a cadential tone.

**Example 3.6.1  Pera Gunting Pitch Inventory**

The singer utilizes some melisma in the singing. The additional syllable “e” is used to fit the song text to the fixed melody. Melisma is used on the word *kanang* (bar 22), *yok* (25), *hae* (bar 30). The “e” syllable is used in *e yok haduk hae* (*yok*: return, *haduk*: house, *hae*: people) (bar 29-30) and *e lehat e mo* (*lehat*: rest, *mo*: evening) (bar 31-32). The singer also ends phrases with a slight tremolo (bar 32).
Example 3.6.2  Pera Gunting Vocal Line

Example 3.6.3  Pera Gunting *Jule* and Vocal Lines
Ornamented Melody: *Jule* Line

The *jule* player plays a variation of the singer’s melody using different rhythmic motifs such as dotted rhythms (bar 22, 30), repeated notes (bar 20, 28, 32) and a *portamento* and *appoggiatura* (bar 7, 15). In the *jule* instrumental interlude section (bar 73, 88), double stops of fourths, fifths and octaves and emphasis (Bars 3, 4, 8 etc).

Rhythmic Pattern and Time-Marker

The texture is similar to that of the previous songs. The *banjeng* playing creates offbeat rhythm that interlocks with the on-beat rhythms of the *tambo*. The *tawak* maintains a constant colotomic unit marking every first beat of the duple meter.

*Joget*-style Songs

Among the eleven music recordings (nine songs and two instrumental pieces) I recorded, six are in *jo’oh*-style, and five are in *joget*-style. The *joget*-style pieces are characterized by a three-against-two rhythmic pattern, which can be utilized either in the melodic and old rhythmic section. In the next section, I argue that the *joget*-style songs are also characterized by specific chromatic ornamentation, such as the flat 3, sharp 4 and flat 7. In addition, the pitch inventories of *joget*-style songs have expanded to larger ranges. This causes difficulty in the distinction between upper and lower, as pitches begin to overlap. Therefore, I depart from naming sections as upper and lower registers. Instead I name them section 1 and 2.
**Ganding Song**

The Ganding Song is a *joget*-style song, characterized by the three against two rhythmic patterns. Besides, the Jaboi Song, the Ganding Song is usually the other song featured when the Mah Meri perform. It is fast and lively. The tempo is 100 beats to a minute. The song begins with a *jule* instrumental followed by the singing of vocables. When the singer enters, the *jule* player plays variations on her melody. After each verse, the singer pauses for a *jule* interlude. The verse ends with the singing of vocables and concludes after an instrumental coda by the *jule*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Minute</th>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>No of bars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>1-63</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 1)</td>
<td>01:22</td>
<td>64-94</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>02:00</td>
<td>95-125</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>B (Verse 2)</td>
<td>02:38</td>
<td>126-155</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>03:15</td>
<td>156-187</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 3)</td>
<td>03:53</td>
<td>188-217</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>04:30</td>
<td>218-280</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A = *jule* instrumental & vocables  \  A1 = *jule* Instrumental  \  B=Voice and *jule*

**Melody: Vocal Line**

The piece is in strophic form. The form of the vocal line is a a b b. There is less contrast in pitch range between the upper and lower register in the Ganding Song than in previous songs because of the extension of pitches in both. The division into two melodic section still exists, however, I renamed the sections 1 and 2 because there is less distinction between the upper and register as their tones overlap. The difference in the starting pitch range of each section is also very close. For example, section 1 begins with A4 while section 2 begins a semitone higher, which is Bb4.
Example 3.7.2. The cadences in the second section (bars 84-85, 92-93) sections are a Perfect 5th apart, indicating a V-I aesthetic for ending song.

Example 3.7.1  Ganding Song Pitch Inventory

Section (a) uses six tones, while section (b) uses eight tones. Unlike the other jo-oh songs, chromatic tones are added to both sections. These chromatic tones, F# and Bb are conveniently produced by sliding the finger forward and backward respectively from fingering in the first position of the C major scale for the classical violin, so this does not necessarily imply that they are using Western violin methods.

The singer uses tremolo (bars 66, 78) at end phrases, portamento (bars 84) and tuplets (bars 68, 76). Melismatic singing occurs often (bars 68, 76, 90). There are some pitches that are hard to distinguish especially at the end of phrases bars 85, 93).
The *jule* frequently uses the “three against two” pattern (bars 45, 49, 57, 61), a feature of the *joget*-style songs in the Mah Meri repertoire. There are more ornaments such as turns (bars 44, 46) and double stops (bar 57) in this song. The *jule* player emphasizes the second beat of the triplet rhythm (bars 57) played on a double stop. Shown below (Example 3.7.3) is the first verse of the interaction between the *jule* and vocal in Ganding Song.

**Interaction between *jule* and vocal line**

The *jule* and singer perform in unison with some heterophony. The *jule* varies the basic melody with triplets (bars 45, 49, 50 etc.), turns (46, 54, 59, 62), transitions (bars 47-48, 63-64), and double stops (bar 57).
Rhythmic Pattern and Time-Marker

The texture is similar to that of the previous songs. The banjeng playing creates offbeat rhythm that interlocks with the on-beat rhythms of the tambo. The tawak maintains a constant colotomic unit marking every first beat the duple meter (see Appendices)

Example 3.7.3  Ganding Jule and Vocal Line
Balaw Song

Form

The Balaw Song is in strophic form. Similar to many songs, the Balaw Song begins and ends with a *jule* instrumental section. Balaw Song, however omits the *jule* instrumental interludes; therefore, the singer continues singing directly from verse to verse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Minute</th>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>No of bars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>1-35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 1)</td>
<td>00:43</td>
<td>36-70</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 2)</td>
<td>01:23</td>
<td>71-105</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 3)</td>
<td>02:02</td>
<td>106-140</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 4)</td>
<td>02:40</td>
<td>141-175</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 1 reprise)</td>
<td>03:18</td>
<td>176-210</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>03:56</td>
<td>211-241</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A= Jule  B= Voice and Jule*

Example 3.8.1 Balaw Pitch Inventory

The Balaw Song utilizes six tones for both first and second sections, and ten tones (including one chromatic tone) in the Section 2. Section 1 begins on B4 while section 2 begins on E4, a fifth lower (Example 3.8.2). The melody of this song
features some reference to the older style use of intervals of a third. There appear to
be structural tones a third apart and neighboring tones and passing tones; however,
I prefer not to confine the melodic description to this format. I suggest that new
tunes often branch out with modifications and innovations to the old tunes through
the addition of pitches or rearrangement of parts of the melody.

Example 3.8.2  Balaw Vocal Line

The interaction between the *jule* and vocal

The *jule* frequently uses the three against two (bars 37, 38, 45 etc.) rhythmic
feature of the *joget*-style *songs* in the Mah Meri repertoire. When the *jule* is not
playing this pattern, it plays basically in unison with the vocal line, extending
phrases by repeating the last pitch until the next vocal entry (bars 39, 43, 47, 51, 59)
or using double stops an octave apart (59, 60) (Example 3.8.3).
Example 3.8.3  Balaw Jule and Vocal Line

Verse 1
0:23min

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.

Ju

Voc.
Rhythmic Pattern and Time-Marker

The texture is similar to that of the previous songs. The banjeng playing creates an offbeat rhythm that interlocks with the onbeat rhythms of the tambo. The tawak maintains a constant colotomic pulse marking every first beat the duple meter (see Appendices).

Musang Song

The tempo of Musang song is slightly slower than Jaboi or Ganding Song with a tempo of 90 beats (or quarter notes) to a minute. The form of the song features a jule instrumental introduction and coda. There is no alternation between the singer and jule. The piece is in strophic form, and the jule plays in unison of slight heterophony with the vocal line. One interesting feature is that each verse has only three lines, unlike the typical four lines in most of the other songs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Minute</th>
<th>Bars</th>
<th>No of bars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (Intro)</td>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>1-22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 1)</td>
<td>00:31</td>
<td>23-45</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 2)</td>
<td>01:00</td>
<td>46-69</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 3)</td>
<td>01:30</td>
<td>70-91</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 4)</td>
<td>02:00</td>
<td>92-114</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 1 Reprise)</td>
<td>02:39</td>
<td>115-137</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A (Coda)</td>
<td>02:58</td>
<td>137-161</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A= jule, B= Voice and jule

Melody: Vocal Line

The pitch inventories of the vocal and jule lines are divided into section 1 and 2. Each verse has three lines. The form of the verses is a b b. Section 2 begins one octave lower than 1. Both utilize many tones, and have the cadential tone of C.
Section 2 includes a chromatic tone. The verse is labeled 1 and 2 instead of upper and lower registers because there is little distinction between the upper and lower registers and the tones in both lines overlap.

Example 3.9.1  Musang Pitch Inventory

Example 3.9.2  Musang Vocal Line
This song is sung in a soothing and mellow style. The singer uses melismatic singing on some syllables in the songs (bar 33, 41, 43). Some of the starting pitches of section 2 are vague (bar 31, 39). The sharp 4 chromatic tone (F#) is used in this song. The singer uses tremolo at the end of melodic phrases (bar 37). Section 1 and 2 begin on octave apart but both utilize a wide range of tones, sometimes overlapping each other. Unlike the division to lower and register of previous songs, Musang Song utilizes a wider range of tones. There is a return to a cadential tone, C, in both section 1 and 2.

**Example 3.9.3**  
**Musang Jule and Vocal Line**
The interaction between the *jule* and vocal

The *jule* and singer perform in unison with some heterophony such as doubling (bars 7 and 15), turns (bar 5 and 63), and transitions (bars 7-8, 15-16, 23-24). The *jule* plays double stops on fifths (bars 11-12, 19-20).

Rhythmic Pattern and Time-Marker

The texture is similar to that of the previous songs. The *banjeng* playing creates offbeat rhythm that interlocks with the on-beat rhythms of the *tambo*. The *tawak* maintains a constant colotomic unit marking every first beat the duple meter.

**Sidud Song**

Form

Similar to Musang Song, the Sidud song is in strophic form. The song features a *jule* instrumental introduction and coda. There is no alternation between the singer and *jule* besides this. The verses are sung to the same melody, while the instrument plays in a slight variation of the vocal line.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Sidud Song (Joget-styled songs)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verse</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Verse 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A=* *jule*  \*B=* *Voice and jule*
Example 3.10.1  Sidud Pitch Inventory

Example 3.10.2  Sidud Vocal Line

In this song, there is little distinction between upper and lower registers.

Section 1 uses seven tones. Section 2 explores a wider range of tones and uses 11 tones (5 of which are octave duplications). Both sections cadence on C.
Interaction between *jule* and vocal

The *jule* and singer perform in unison with some heterophony. The *jule* varies the basic melody with tuplets (bar 47, 63), turn (39), transitions (bars 40-41, 48-49, 56-57), and double stops (bars 42, 46, 47).

**Example 3.10.3  ** Sidud *Jule* and Vocal Line
Rhythmic Pattern and Time-Marker

The texture is similar to that of the previous songs. The banjeng playing creates offbeat rhythm that interlocks with the on-beat rhythms of the tambo. The tawak maintains a constant colotomic unit marking every first beat the duple meter.

‘Ari Moyang Song

Similar to the Musang and the Sidud Song, this song is also strophic. The form of the song features a jule instrumental solo only in the introduction. There is no alternation between the singer and jule besides this. The verses are each sung to the same melody (strophic form), while the instrument plays a variation of the vocal line.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Ari Moyang Song (Joget-Style Songs)</th>
<th>( \text{Verse} )</th>
<th>( \text{Minute} )</th>
<th>( \text{Bars} )</th>
<th>( \text{No of bars} )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Instrumental</td>
<td>00:00</td>
<td>1-32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>00:35</td>
<td>33-64</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>01:10</td>
<td>65-96</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>01:42</td>
<td>97-128</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>02:15</td>
<td>129-160</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5</td>
<td>02:48</td>
<td>161-201</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A= Jule B= Voice and Jule

Melody

The song is written in joget style, characterized by the three-against two rhythm. Section 1 uses five tones with an F# as a lower neighboring tone. The melodic pattern cadences on G4, the fifth of C major. Section 2 uses more pitches than the upper register. This song shows two central tones of a fifth apart. The
singer’s pitch becomes ambiguous at phrase endings (bars 39, 47, 52). This song can also be played to the strumming of guitar chords compared to the earlier songs.

Example 3.11.1  ‘Ari Moyang Vocal Pitch Inventory

Example 3.11.2  “Ari Moyang Vocal Line
Example 3.11.3  ‘Ari Moyang *Jule* and Vocal Line

Interaction between *jule* and vocal line

The *jule* and singer perform in unison with some heterophony. The *jule* varies the basic melody with triplets (bars 35, 37, 38 etc), turn (43), transitions (bars 40, 48), and double stops (bars 55, 56).

Rhythmic Pattern and Time-Marker

The texture is similar to that of the previous songs. The *banjeng* playing creates an offbeat rhythm that interlocks with the onbeat rhythms of the *tambo*. The *tawak* marks every first beat of the duple meter.
Mah Meri and Malay Joget Songs

Although the Mah Meri and Malay music and music ensemble bears resemblance, they are also very different in their own ways. The Mah Meri joget-style songs use a larger pitch inventory that includes more tones and chromatic notes (especially the use of flat 3, sharp 4 and flat 7 tones). These chromatic tones occur in Dondang Sayang of the Baba Nonya of Malacca and Malay joget songs. Malay joget forms are eclectic; they incorporate Chinese pentatonic scales, Western diatonic scales, Middle Eastern maqams, and Indian raga (Tan and Matusky 2004: 323). However, the Main Jo’oh songs eschewed influences such as the Augmented second and fourth intervals, a fundamental feature of Middle Eastern music. The joget pitch inventory is expanded as the Mah Meri musical aesthetics differ from those of the joget songs influenced by Arabic maqam. Some Main Jo’oh songs use pentatonic and hexatonic tones, but unlike the typical Chinese pentatonic scale characterized by the minor third interval, the Mah Meri prefer to use anhemitonic scales, a feature of some Orang Asli music (Roseman 1991).

The Main Jo’oh vocal part utilizes more pitches than the three to four structural tones of the late 1900s. Contacts with local and foreign cultures during multi-cultural performances may contribute to this change. However, even though there are changes, the Main Jo’oh songs maintain indigeneity through the features described above: upper and lower registers, with the second register exploring a wider range than the first, and the flat 3, flat 7 and sharp 4 chromatic notes.
### Summary

#### Table 5.0 Summary of Changes in the Main Jo’oh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Late 1900s</th>
<th>Early 2000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pitch Inventory</strong></td>
<td>Structural tones of three to four tones sung by singer</td>
<td>Some structural tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Florid embellishment of structural tones</td>
<td>Upper and lower registers gradually replaced by sections (1 &amp; 2) with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper and lower registers</td>
<td>wider pitch ranges and chromatic tones that overlap each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Musical Instruments</strong></td>
<td>Colotomic function</td>
<td>Colotomic function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Tambo and tungtung</em></td>
<td><em>Tawak</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interlocking Pattern</td>
<td>Interlocking Pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Tambo</em></td>
<td><em>Banjeng</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Downbeat Patterns</td>
<td>Downbeat Patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Tungtung and tambo</em></td>
<td><em>Tungtung, Tambo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Texture</strong></td>
<td>Focused on virtuosic improvisation between <em>jule</em> and singer.</td>
<td>Function became more dense and ensemble like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Jule</em> plays skeletal accompaniment when singer improvises song texts.</td>
<td><em>Jule</em> played in heterophony with the singer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Jule</em> played florid running passages of chromatic pitches and turns</td>
<td>Florid passages were replaced by turns, <em>appoggiatura, portamento</em>, double</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>stops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Form</strong></td>
<td>Less structure time limit or standardization of bars</td>
<td>Standard number of bars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Song texts are improvised</td>
<td>for <em>jule</em> and singer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Jule</em> interludes gradually eliminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocables in Jaboi and Ganding Song only</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Written song texts</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The musical analysis of Mah Meri music from two eras shows that there is a change in pitch inventory, texture, and function of instruments, musical techniques and ornamentation. The three to four pitch chants of the early 1900s and the use of structural tones in the late 1900s are the basic foundation into which additional pitches are incorporated. The remnants of ascending and descending movements of pitches built on intervals of a third can be traced in some contemporary songs for e.g. Tok Naning Song and Balaw Song. A clear change is seen in the extended pitch range of the singer. The songs from the late 1900s show a limited range of four or five tones. The Jaboi song of the contemporary era maintains this pitch range but the rest of the jo’oh style and especially the joget-style songs began to utilize more tones. The jo’oh style song uses five to six tones but maintains the contrasting sections in upper and lower registers. The melodic patterns in these registers and the song text is always repeated twice. The second register (jo’oh-style songs) or section (in joget-style songs) always utilize more pitches, using a wider tessitura than the first register or section.

The jule, introduced in the late 1900s, improvises on the structural tones of the music. Florid patterns utilizing ascending and descending chromaticism and turns formed the heterophonic embellishments to the structural tones of the jule during the late 1900s. In the early 2000s, the Main Jo’oh songs, especially the joget-styled songs began to explore a wider pitch range. The incorporation of new pitches was shaped around the C major (representative pitch) fingering position on the jule. It was also produced by the aesthetic flavor of altering specific pitches such as flat 3,
flat 7 and sharp 4. This may also be influenced by the convenient front and backward slide of the fingering positions on the jule. The Mah Meri did not incorporate the aesthetic of an augmented 2nd and augmented 4th intervals inherent in the Arabic maqams brought to Malaysia. This strongly shows a conscious deflection from incorporating a flavor connecting to Islamic scales.

The rhythmic layer, characterized by the banjeng, tambo and tungtung, provides rhythmic density and timbral diversity to the music. The banjeng has been resignified from its use in séances to staged performances. Its traditional function of providing the volume and timbre for the invocation of specific spirits (Roseman 1991, Oesch 1977) now functions as a unique “silvery” offbeat pattern.

In the late 1900s, the interlocking rhythms of the tambo resembled the interlocking patterns played by the gendang and gedombak from the Malay traditions. This function disappeared from the tambo in the early 2000s. Instead the tambo emulated the driving rhythm of the tungtung. The banjeng's conspicuous dampened and undampened “jittering” sound replaces the tambo in creating the interlocking “feel” inherent in the music of the late 1900s. The fact that another instrument supplies the missing rhythmic element shows the importance of the “interlocking parts” in Mah Meri music.

The tawak provides consistent emphasis on the first beat of all the duple meter songs. For some songs, the tawak marked cadential points by increasing its strikes on it. The tawak frames the foundation to the colotomic unit of Main Jo’oh songs. In the late 1900s, the tawak was not available; therefore the colotomic unit was framed interchangeable between the tungtung and tambo.
In the early 2000s, the *jule* and voice began to function more as an ensemble rather than as separate elements that demonstrated individual virtuosity. Instead of florid patterns, the *jule* focuses on *appogiaturas, portamentos*, turns and double stops of fifths and octaves. The reduction of *jule* playing to an accompaniment rather than a solo, and the decline of text improvisation, have resulted in the use of a different kind of ornamentation. Instead of decorating the songs with fast passages of chromatic passing notes, the *jule* player plays simpler rhythmic motifs ornamented with more *appogiaturas, portamento* and double stops. There is also an increased used of *portamento*, a slide that creates a “coaxing”[^124] or soothing style, typical of Malay love songs. In the contemporary environment there is more time for relaxation in the evenings and interaction (as compared with previous nomadic lifestyle). Music may have been used for romance and courting. Although I have no examples of love songs from Kampung Sungai Bumbun, other researchers have collected samples of these songs, and an upcoming anthology of Mah Meri songs published by Universiti Malaya will feature some of them.

The space for *jule* melodic improvisation has been replaced by a formal instrumental interlude for the *jule* player. This gives the singer a chance to rest and catch her breath while the dancers continue dancing. However, the function of the *jule* interlude has also begun to give way, especially in the *joget*-style songs, to a continuous singing of verses in strophic form, with the *jule* interlude used only as an introduction and coda to the song. There has also been a reduction in the use of vocables. In the contemporary songs, only the Jaboi and Ganding song use vocables.

[^124]: Literally translated from the Malay word “pujuk,” to convince using a soft, “pampering” tone.
to begin and end the song. I posit that these changes are due to performance time limitations. Depending on venue, sponsorship, or event, a tourist performance usually lasts no longer than ten to fifteen minutes. This contrasts with the previous informal nature of music in the villages, which celebrate until the wee hours, with musicians and singers taking turns to keep the music going. Instrumental interludes were then fundamental to providing a continuous flow of music throughout the night. Compressing the best of the music into a short and “spectacular” performance has resulted in the music becoming more dense (vertically compressed into thicker vertical textures). This style reflects the nature of contemporary consumer products—where miniature, lightweight, compressed—such Macbook Air, (the thinnest and lightest Mac notebook), three-in-1 shampoos, or a combination of two flavors (green tea and jasmine tea in one teabag). This character is reflected in the features of standardization, and predictability of McDonaldization (Ritzer 1993), and Disneyization (2004).

The newer songs are structured in strophes and organized into specific number of bars, features accommodating to modernization, globalization and tourism. Resignified from ritual to staged performances, the focus on the virtuosity of the musicians was shifted to the visual aesthetic of the female dancers and masked male dancers. With the limelight resignified to the dancers, the musicians began to function as accompanists. The need for shorter spectacles, the singer’s singing of vocables and the jule interludes was left out in the later joget-style songs.

Although the singer uses the coarse, nasal qualities of Mah Meri singing, there is gradual “softening” of this quality in the contemporary songs. Some songs
began to sound more soothing and gentle e.g. Kuwang Kuit Song. The singer sings in a syllabic style with only occasional melisma. There is a tendency to add a tremolo or slide to unspecific pitch at phrases endings. The singer also uses a nonlexical syllable, the vowel "e" to fit the song text into the melody.

The jule player plays almost in unison with the singer’s melody in all songs except the older, more traditional Jaboi and Ganding songs. In these songs, there were more flowing melodic passages with passing notes and neighbor tones and structural tones that do not fall on the downbeats of the music. In the later songs, the downbeats of the jule melody coincided with the singer’s downbeats. Variation is created in the jule using different rhythmic motifs and ornamentation. This style embodies the musical atmosphere in the village. The Main Jo’oh music is pro-forma for performance and shows only. It is not recreational music played in the evenings for leisure. The guitar, the radio, CD players and mp3 music downloaded into cellphones are the typical music listened to by villagers. There is a decline in musical composition and practice, resulting from a decline in musical interaction between the jule and the singer. This may explain the tendency to play in unison with the singer.

The remnants of structural tones are still audible in some songs, for while there is change, there is also continuity. Some songs sound similar to others, and the new Mah Meri compositions often draw on earlier songs. This may be a subconscious technique of oral traditions, where recollections of memories combine with new tunes. This similarity is heard in the ‘Ari Moyang, Balaw and Ganding Songs. They sound similar to the older jo-oh style songs but are quite different. I also
posit that the late Unyan Awas was responsible for composing many of the later joget-style songs, although his family is not sure of this. The jule fingering position he preferred may have produced the type of melodies in my collection.

As the Mah Meri become more absorbed into national policies, modernization, and globalization, it is inevitable that their music begins to adapt to the musical soundscape to which they are exposed. However, while there is change, there is also continuity, which is sustained by their desire to maintain their unique ethnic identity. Resistance informs and slows the pace of change. The changes are subtle and not conspicuous unless examined closely.

The next chapter examines the impact of modernization and globalization on contemporary (early 2000) song texts. As the Mah Meri begin to be absorbed into the modern system of capitalism and consumerism, they adopt the culture of individualism and materialism inherent in modern societies. Some excerpts of the Main Jo’oh song texts call for a return to Mah Meri cultural values, solidarity and sense of community.
CONTEMPORARY SONG TEXTS (EARLY 2000s): SINGING TO RECAPTURE THE ETHOS OF A PAST COMMUNITY

The Song of the Roe-Deer
Oho! Lift him up, the roe-deer has fallen!
Bear him now homewards and cook my roe-deer;
When you have cooked him, quarter my roe-deer,
And give unto each an equal portion.
(Source: Skeat and Blagden 1906)

Lagu Sidud (Sidud Song)
Hentok bakar, hentok manggan  The bakau banana, the mangan banana
Gulai hengkik bangar mui bangar Make us one cauldron, one cauldron
E’ed khabar hik ngan I have advised but they ignore
Kaluk kop samak pakat samak If possible, let’s work together
(Zainuddin Unyan, 2009)

The two songs are from sources separated by a century, but both speak of the communality so fundamental to the socio-cultural system of the Mah Meri. The first song is descriptive and embodies an intimacy with nature and animals, while the second is purposeful and expresses a strong desire for return to communal life. The metaphor mui bangar (one cauldron) found in the second line of the Sidud song is emblematic of a society of communality. It is one of many new song texts that express aversion to the culture of individualism, materialism, and other indulgences stimulated by development, modernization and globalization in Malaysia. It shows some of the Mah Meri’s growing attachment to the global web of consumerism and capitalism.

This chapter examines two main issues: 1) fragments of song texts demonstrating communality and solidarity 2) the pastiche method of contemporary
song text composition. In Chapter 5, I posited that song texts of the early and late 1900s demonstrate changes in the ecology and social interactions of the Mah Meri. In the early 2000s, I suggest that song texts respond to national policies, modernization, globalization, and tourism. This chapter focuses on fragments of song texts in contemporary songs that call for a return to the spirit of communality and solidarity, reminiscing about and imagining of a past communal village, in response to modernization and globalization. The next chapter’s (Chapter 7) section on song texts focuses on the assertion of place and presence in response to national policies of assimilation and integration.

In contemporary composition, fragments of traditional Mah Meri texts inherited from the oral tradition are intertwined with excerpts of song texts from Mah Meri mengge (elder) and newly composed texts from Zainuddin Unyan and Maznah Unyan. Unlike Mah Meri songs of the early 1900s, which are monothematic, contemporary Mah Meri songs are multi-themed. The decontextualization of fragmented song texts from their original contexts, their insertion into different songs, and their interweaving into multi-themed songs, reflect a postmodern culture of subverted order, loss of centralization, and fragmentation.

**Pastiche in Contemporary Song Text Composition**

The Main Jo’oh troupe led by the late Unyan Awas, the famous jule player and composer, fell into decline after his death in the 90s. Samah Seman, Unyan’s wife and lead singer, currently in her 80s, suffered a stroke in the early 2000s, disabling her speech. The Main Jo’oh troupe became inactive for a few years. But the
government and tourist industry’s interest in the Mah Meri performance, both as an ethnic representation and tourist attraction, stimulated Unyan’s children to revive the performing troupe in 2003. Maznah Unyan became the lead singer, while Zainuddin Unyan took over as the jule player.¹²⁵

Due to the new demand for performances, a readily available repertoire of songs was needed. This spurred Maznah and Zainuddin to compose songs, written down and standardized, which form part of the corpus for this dissertation. Neither Maznah nor Zainuddin could remember many of the song texts sung by Samah Seman. However, both remembered the original melodies of titled songs because the tunes had become engrained in their memories. Since music was improvisatory and song-debate was performed impromptu, song texts in the old days were spontaneously created and not notated.

Zainuddin and Maznah wrote down fragmented song texts they remembered from their moyang (ancestors), their mother, Samah Seman, and her sister, Ranggun Seman (in her 80s now). Many of these song texts (most in the form of poems) were remembered in association with their tune and title. Mah Meri song texts from their ancestors inserted into contemporary song texts are decontextualized from the past and resignified in the present context of the new song. I suggest the term “pastiche” (Jameson 1988) to describe this style of composition.

Pastiche is defined by Jameson as the “imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other

¹²⁵ Maznah Unyan is Unyan Awas and Samah Seman’s daughter, while Zainuddin Unyan is their son. The Main Jo’oh tradition is a family tradition inherited from their ancestors.
styles” (Jameson 1991, 113). Pastiche also refers to “a medley of various ingredients; a hotchpotch, farrago, jumble.”

It is built on “copying, scavenging, and recombining of cultural texts regardless of context. It is a visual representation composed of decontextualized signifiers and fetishizers” (Goldman 1992, 216). Pastiche resembles the concept of schizophrenia. Jameson defines the schizophrenic experience as “an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous, which fail to link up to a coherent sequence” (Jameson 1998, 119). The recently composed Main Jo’oh repertoire of song texts can be seen as as schizophrenic through their combination of multiple themes devoid of historical or chronological organization, and decontextualized from their original time and context. These themes include songs asserting place (flora and fauna) and presence (social activities, belief and value system, filial piety and kinship, adat (custom), and communication with tourists).

Another prominent feature of contemporary song texts is that the content of songs have little reference to the their titles. The multiple themes derived from fragmented non-linear or subverted order of events reflects the decentralization of the subject and focus on a central theme, characteristic of postmodernism. This makes taxonomy for contemporary compositions difficult. Previously, tunes and titles were mnemonic devices that aided memory of song texts. Although tunes are still associated with the titles in contemporary songs, the song texts are not. One of the causes for this is the shift from oral to written tradition. Printing and recording

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of song texts makes mnemonic devices such as associating titles and tunes unnecessary.

Once there is no longer need to transmit things orally since things are recorded on paper or tapes or digitalized, there is no longer a need for such mnemonic devices. Yet the titles and the melodies remain (though the contents change), which may simply be remnants of the oral tradition during the transition to modern society. (Andaya, pers. comm., October 20, 2010)

The next section selectively examines themes in contemporary song texts that seek to recapture the ethos of a past Mah Meri community, one of communality and solidarity. I begin by contrasting the Mah Meri worldview with that of modern developed societies. I then present the increasing effects of globalization and individualism on the Mah Meri. Some of their statements regarding the impact of modernization on their village are inserted between the example song texts. Aware of the gradual decline of their cultural and moral values, the Main Jo'oh troupe actively engages in revitalizing their culture by composing songs calling for a return to indigenous wisdom, worldviews, life style, and ethos of a community whose central values originated with a respect for the laws of nature. Good relationships with tourists are also expressed through song texts. Mah Meri experiences in their village and beyond are voiced through their song texts.

Indigenous Versus National Notions of Progress

About 350 million indigenous people\(^{127}\) worldwide (Hall and Fenelon 2009, 1) struggle today to cope with the aspirations of dominant powers obsessed with

\(^{127}\)U’wa in Columbia are fighting oil development on their lands; Pygmies in Rwanda and Burundi are battling against logging concessions in their forests; the Igorot, Mangyan and Lumad people in the
constructing an ultimate luxurious, instantaneous, and toil-free life style for humanity. Technical advances have pushed many niches of society into the global capitalistic hegemony, one marked by the tantalizing lure of consumerism and materialism. The capitalistic system, which I refer to as hegemony, introduces many consumer products that are fetishized and packaged to disguise the simplicity of their original function. Development, modernization, and globalization have also resulted in the destruction of the environment and transformation of value systems vital to the existence of an ethnic group. This is the price paid for the new leisure acquired.

The following statement summarizes the central difference between indigenous worldviews of progress as compared with the view of modern society. “Paradigm wars or worldview wars are deeply based in the contrasting understandings of how humans should live on earth” (Mander 2006, 1). The core difference between indigenous and corporate interests is their treatment of the earth’s resources. The former are based on sustaining a perpetual reproductive cycle, while the latter thrive on exhausting resources to maximize short-term profits.

Indigenous societies have maintained a subsistence livelihood for centuries—hunting, foraging, fishing, and swidden agriculture—with a concern for “reciprocal relationships with nature, economies of limit and balance, central

Philippines are resisting incursions of mining corporation into their ancestral lands; the Penans of Sarawak, the Cree of Canada, and the Mapuche of Chile are fighting World Bank dam projects (Tauli-Corpuz, 2006, 15)

For example, the function of the bra to support the breasts has now been marketed to fulfill an aesthetic goal. The introduction of Victoria Secret’s full coverage, demi-cup, push-up, racerback, wireless, and multi-way bras exemplifies this fetish.
importance of community values and collective ownership, and their integration into and equality with the natural world” (Mander and Tauli Corpuz 2006, 4). Governed by animistic worldviews emphasizing the reciprocal relationships between the human and supernatural worlds, indigenous societies practice great respect for the earth and have a spiritual relationship with it. Traditional livelihood systems revolve around:

The values of cooperation; family bonding and cross generational communication (including links with ancestors; concern for the well-being of future generations); self-sufficiency and reliance on locally available natural resources; rights to lands, territories and collective and inalienable resources; restraint in resource exploitation; and respect for nature, particularly sacred sites. (Mander and Tauli-Corpuz 2006, 29)

Modern society, unfamiliar with the complexity of indigenous worldviews and their wisdom, continues to extract the earth’s resources to increase production and consumption. Unaware of the importance of the land to indigenous people, modern producers dismiss their needs, relegating them to primitivism and repaying them in cash for land and resources obtained.

The next section describes how modern views stimulated by the capitalistic system are penetrating traditional worldviews and ways of life. I examine the social problems among the Mah Meri introduced by this hegemony. I then analyze how contemporary song texts are used as “weapons” (Scott 1993, 29) to express concerns and rejuvenate a sense of community and adat (custom) in the village. Scott’s argument that subordinate people use ordinary weapons of collective defiance, such as “foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on” in response to a hegemony parallels similar strategies used by the Mah Meri (ibid., xvi, preface). Roseman
describes how Temiars “craft their dance of survival as they grapple with
displacement and stake their place in the nation-state” (Roseman 2007, 1). Her
description of the the radical social, environmental, and political changes that
Temiars have experienced from pre-colonial times to the present global economy is
another interesting parallel to how Orang Asli respond to changes.

**Modernization**

The Orang Asli were considered to be hindrances to the achievement of
“Vision 2020” (Ahmad Sarji 1993) and an impediment to the exploitation of
resources that lie within the areas of minority groups (Maybury-Lewis 1996). Their
subsistence life style, animist religion, and forest and mangrove habitats did not
match the vision of a developed population. Measured by quantitative indicators
such as income per capita, the Orang Asli economic level falls below the poverty
level (Taylor 1975, 45).

During the 1960s, the nation-state decided to implement social,
psychological, and political changes into the notion of a developed country, rather
than mere measure only economic development. It was thought that
underdevelopment existed because the cultures of the less developed countries
were antagonistic to the competitive values of western capitalism (Clements 1980,
13). The new emphasis on development as modernization then revolved around
ways to ensure that modern culture replaced traditional culture, so that traditional
obstacles to development could be reduced, if not eliminated. However, to be
modern meant to consume goods and services manufactured in the advanced
industrial countries. The agreeable word “modern” was frequently used as a substitute for the less agreeable word “western” (Nicholas 2000).

Figure 5.1. Children gathering around Julida Uju’s new television bought in 2009 (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

After Independence, the national government began a policy of dominance and paternalism over the Orang Asli, with an ultimate goal of assimilating the Orang Asli into the mainstream community. Two policies were established to achieve this goal: 1) modernizing the people, and 2) conversion to Islam (Nicholas 2000). These policies caused the Mah Meri to rethink their sense of identity within the nation-state. Rather than being assimilated, the Mah Meri believe that their way of life, culture, worldview and livelihood needs to be acknowledged, accepted, and celebrated as part of the cultural diversity in Malaysia.

Compared with Western notions of progress such as Rostow’s theories, the Mah Meri were seen as uncivilized and primitive, and therefore had to be developed. A cultural-assimilationist approach (developed along the lines of western colonial
expansionism) was adopted whereby the ultimate prescription was for cultural transformation into a politically defined mainstream (ibid., 22). Social change, with modernization as its final goal, would be a natural and uniform process, but was in fact a process of deculturation (Devalle 1992, 38-39). The Malaysian government pursued modernization in the form of education, healthcare, houses, and amenities (Chapter 2). These forms of neo-colonialism denigrated the Mah Meri language, traditional medicine, biodegradable huts, and household implements such as baskets and water-scoops made from leaves. The Mah Meri were made to feel inferior about the skills they had inherited from their ancestors. The training of agents who implemented these development programs did not prepare them to mediate between indigenous and modern values, but instead taught them to look down on indigenous peoples as “ignoramuses” (Sardan 2005, 205). These changes and the gradual destruction of the environment also caused the decline of Mah Meri knowledge of the environment, natural resources for food consumption, and medicinal cures.

**Globalization**

Globalization is a wide and far-reaching concept, but it can be characterized by a time-compressed space (Harvey 1990), lightning-speed communication systems, global networking, travel and migration, consumerism and capitalism, exploitation of market structures by rich countries, cultural homogenization, breakdown of religious canons, indigenous ethnogenocide, and urbanization (Berger and Huntington 2002, Chase and Dunn 2006, Featherstone 1990, Podobnik
2005, Robertson 1992, Robinson 2004). It has affected the world in myriad ways. At its best, it brings speed and efficiency; at its worst, it produces sweatshops, environmental degradation, homogenization, mass consumption, waste and toxic accumulation, diseases, and the spread of a culture of individualism.

One of the earliest manifestations of the homogenization of knowledge was “print capitalism” (Anderson 1983)\(^{129}\), which enabled the use of linguistic power to dominate, colonize and control minds across the globe. Printing as a form of media is one of the first ways in which subjective events became objectified. The need for clarity in thought evoked the need for standardization and homogenization in writing. Therefore the subjectivity of events is often blurred to avoid confusion or to embrace the “gray” areas of any event or phenomenon. This type of predictability is parallel to the shift from through-composed song texts (early 1900s and late 1900s) to standard strophes (early 2000s).

Besides print capitalism, “McDonaldization” (Ritzer 1993) is another syndrome of modern society useful in the discussion of the elements of homogeneity, standardization, and predictability as concepts that underscore the relationship of contemporary lifestyle to the fast food industry. Ritzer points out that this industry thrives on four dimensions emblematic of modern society: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Efficiency capitalizes on “the best available way to get from being hungry to being full,” such as the pre-packaged microwaveable lunches, ready-made cake mixes, frozen pizzas, and chicken nuggets.

\(^{129}\) Anderson (1983) uses print capitalism in the context of how nationalism is promulgated. I speak of print capitalism as a generalized form of knowledge dissemination.
Efficiency also strives to eliminate personal flaws or even personal warmth between the producer and consumer. Cash registers replace the capacity of the human brain, while “too much personal attention explaining a product is discouraged, for the next in line is waiting impatiently to pay.” Calculability points to “the quantitative aspects of products sold (portion, size, cost) and services offered (the time it takes to get the product)” (ibid., 13). For McDonald’s, bigger and faster is better (of course, the high profit margins guarantee that the producers win the game here). Predictability refers to the assurance that “products will always be the same over time and in all locales” (ibid., 14). Control is exerted over the people through the predictable menu and limited options. This is to ensure that people will buy, eat, and leave quickly. McDonald’s is only one of the homogenizing components encircling the globe.

Others include: Starbucks, Sushi King, and Victoria’s Secret. The relevance of these features to song texts will be discussed in the later part of this chapter. The homogenization of culture has also triggered opposite reactions:

The more homogenous our life styles become, the more steadfastly we shall cling to deeper values—religion, language, art and literature. As our outer worlds grow more similar, we will increasingly treasure the traditions that spring from within. (Naisbitt 1990, 120)

In addition to the homogenizing effects of globalization processes, another syndrome of modern society is the culture of individualism that stimulates the content of Mah Meri song text composition.
The Culture of Individualism

Globalization has radically changed the way people live and view their lives. Shifting from collective societies to independent individuals striving for self-fulfillment, the vision of meaning in life is transformed from collective achievement, tolerance, and perseverance to self-attainment, personalized physical beauty, instantaneous satisfaction, short-term jobs, and transient relationships. Modern society may be defined as the “throwaway” society, as dubbed by Toffler (1970), a society that is able to “throw away values, lifestyles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being.” (Harvey 1990, 286) Concerns with the modern life style, the Mah Meri sing to remind their people of their cultural values and way of life—one of communality and solidarity.

The culture of individualism is growing rapidly throughout the globe. Elliot says:

Everywhere in contemporary society, people desperately search for self-fulfillment and try to minimize 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 2006, 2-3)

Elliot also states that individualism is related to the growth of privatized worlds, which causes individuals to shut out their emotional lives.

Under the impact of privatism, the self is denied any wider relational connection at a deeply unconscious level, and on the level of day-to-day behavior, such “new individualisms” set the stage for a unique cultural constellation of anguish, anxiety, fear, disappointment and dread (ibid., 9).

He suggests that the privatization of identities shapes the way in which individuals, organizations, and institutions organize things. Some examples would
be personal cubicles in offices, personal cars, iphones, and emails. Individuals in the modern world find it difficult to share, for personal space has become a necessity in modern society. Car-pooling or sharing rooms takes effort.

Such changes are infiltrating Mah Meri society. Some results that have affected Mah Meri adat (custom) are the decline of communality, egalitarian lifestyle, changing worldviews, moral decadence, and alcoholic tendencies. These influences challenge Mah Meri solidarity and identity. In this chapter, I focus on the culture of individualism, a trait seeping into the way of life in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. Personal statements from the Mah Meri address this concern.

**Calling for a Return to Communalca, Moral Values, and A Collective Society**

As much as the Mah Meri are lured into of the culture of materialism and consumerism, they are aware of its consequences and of the transformation occurring in their once relatively isolated village. Zainuddin Unyan and Maznah Unyan work together to compose song texts addressing the fundamental issues affecting the Mah Meri. Their technique of composing (perhaps due to time constraints) is to piece together memories of song texts from their ancestors and relatives with their own new lyrics, thus congealing the old and new into a contemporary repertoire of songs. These combinations emerge, sometimes organized, and sometimes spontaneous and unorganized to resemble the pastiche manner of combining poems, one removed from time frame, context, and original themes. This pastiche method of composition consolidates the sentiments of villagers over the decades to express the emotions, desires and hopes of Mah Meri
people and the village. The songs seek a return to the ethos of the village the Mah Meri grew up in, the pristine nature of the environment, and the people’s adherence to taboos, worldviews, and ways of life in which peaceful, simple, hard working and attitudes of caring for others prevailed.

The texts of the Main Jo’oh songs I collected and recorded consolidate the aspirations, innovations, and ideas of at least three generations of people from the opoh. Zainuddin and Maznah combine the ideas and hopes of their moyang (ancestors) and their elders, based on each generation’s social-political situation and habitus\(^{130}\) (Bourdieu 1990) as they draw on their nostalgia for the ethos of a community of the past. Desires and experiences detached from temporal and ecological settings are merged song texts sung to tunes of the past. This interesting amalgation results in “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), traditions thought to be old and historical which are, in actuality, new innovations that serve modern contemporary purposes.

In addition, the verses have been standardized in strophic form, and some use the pantun format (see page 148) in which the first two lines foreshadow the meaning revealed in the third and fourth line. While the Main Jo’oh troupe is consciously trying to revive the ethos of the past and the spirit of communality, the form, structure, and technique of song writing subconsciously embody characteristics of the postmodern. The McDonaldization syndrome of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Ritzer 1993) is manifested in a fixed

\(^{130}\) A set of acquired patterns of thought, behaviour, and taste, which according to Bourdieu (1990) constitute the link between social structures and social practice.
repertoire prepared for tourist performances. Predictability assists the dancers in synchronizing their choreography and standardization helps coordinate movements so that the dance appears visually pleasing. Although the dancing in the old days was somewhat coordinated, it was not perfect or sanitized (Bryman 2004) from the spontaneous, non-choreographed type of dancing typical of a festive celebration. Thus, the visual consumption of the Main Jo’oh has also affected the manner in which verses are structured. The next section are examples of contemporary songs that call for a return to the ethos of a past communality and solidarity.

**Contemporary Song Texts**

*Lagu Kuwang Kuit (Kuwang Kuit Song)*

This is a traditional Mah Meri song. Verses 1 and 3 are traditional poems inherited from the Mah Meri moyang (ancestors) through the oral tradition, while verses 2, 4, 5 were recently composed by Zainuddin Unyan. The song is in strophic form and each line is repeated twice. Verses 1, 2 and 4 embody the pantun (Malay poetic form) structure. Verses 1, 3 and 4 describe the scenes in the forests and along the rivers. Verses 2 and 4 evoke the moral values and sense of community remembered from the past. The pastiche feature is seen in the variety of unconnected stories about the Mah Meri ecological niche and the ethos of the village, combined with the ideas of Mah Meri moyang and Zainuddin Unyan.

In verse 2, the Mah Meri cook a large cauldron of coconut curry *ka himang* (eel-tailed catfish) after fishing. “Cooking in one huge cauldron” is a metaphor for sharing and communality. Food from this pot is shared and distributed to family,
friends, and relatives in the village. The Mah Meri seldom eat alone, which they regard as self-centered and bad manners. This verse expresses the importance of communal living, sharing, and working together, and addresses the culture of individualism stimulated by capitalism and consumerism. This song text expresses the same values as those in the early 1900s, where meat caught from the hunt is divided equally among villagers (Chapter 4).

Julida Uju relates her interpretation of verse 5. A person walking by drops a coin that rolls down the road. At the same time he spots a tree loaded with fruit. Attracted by the tree, he does not pursue the coin but rushes to the tree hoping to find some “unknown treasure” under it, but it turns out to be nothing. Julida says,

Although the coin is of little value, yet it exists in reality. This song reminds us to live in the present and not to be distracted by worldly treasures, beautiful from the outside but of unknown real value. (Julida Uju, pers. comm., July 24, 2009)

Julida’s assertions reflect the values of kinship, loyalty, dedication, and hard work of many Mah Meri adults, as well as other traditional societies. These values are being challenged by modernization and globalization in the village today. Kimmie Khamis, in his 30s compares the attitudes of the past Mah Meri with the present:

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 metamorphosis, 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 lost motivation for when I begin to tell a story, the young boys today appear disinterested and leave. (Kimmie Khamis, pers. comm., 17 April, 2009)
Lagu Kuwang Kuit (Kuwang Kuit Song)
Verse 1 & 3: Traditional
Verse 2, 3 & 5: Zainuddin Unyan

Kuwang Kuwang kuit
Melibat daun bakau
Ka menyumpit
Terhirit tintok epau

Verse 1
The flying fox takes flight
Flapping like mangrove leaves blown in the wind
The archer fish shoots at its prey
The fisherman's basket brushes against the water

Masak mui bangak
Ka himang
Jo’oh dek ngagak
Pakat samak

Verse 2, 3 & 5
Cook in one cauldron
Eel-tailed catfish
Jo’oh, don’t be directionless
Work hand-in-hand

Kuwang kuwang kuit
Melibat daun bakau

Verse 3
The flying fox's flight
Its wings like mangrove leaves blown in the wind
If you have some money
Buy me some tobacco

Hik dah duit
Belanjak e’ed tembakau

Verse 4
Hurl a stone
Pelung into the water
Guwit when “climbing perch fish” shoots
I would like to eat the bait

Beluh hak keloh
Bedeg duit ringgit
Beluh hak tekoh
Peley nake e’ed!

Verse 5
Run on the road
A coin drops
Go to the tree
It’s not the fruit we thought it was

(Recorded and transcribed by Clare Chan, 2009)

131 Kuwang kuit (verse 1) is a literary depiction of the visual image influence by sound of the flying fox spreading its wings and soaring from tree to tree.
132 Pelung (verse 3) is the vocable for the sound of a stone hurled into river
133 Guwit (verse 3) is the vocable for the sound of fish “spraying” water at its prey from its mouth.
Kimmie laments the lack of communication and interaction among members of the village today. He bemoans the decline of communal relationships, the villager’s unwillingness to openly share their feelings, and the *tidak apa* (unconcerned) attitude inherent in the village. Disinterest in story-telling has resulted in the decline of this tradition and the moral values formerly transmitted from the old to the young through myths and stories.

**Lagu Pera Gunting (Pera Gunting Song)**

Zainuddin has rewritten this song, but remnants of the story of the *gunting* bird, the Malaysian peacock pheasant, inherited from the oral tradition, are still present. “Pera” and “ting” are the vocal mimicry of this bird’s call. This song is associated with the myth of Moyang Melur (Figure 2.4) who tugged too hard at the *kejel* (potato) plant, creating a huge hole in the ground. He fell into the hole and landed in the fifth world, a world full of maggots, diseases and viruses. “When the *kejel* plant was ripe, the Pera Gunting bird calls could be heard” (Ranggun Seman, pers. comm., April 22, 2010). This bird is considered to be a *moyang* (ancestor) because it is now extinct in the Kampung Sungai Bumbun surroundings (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., April 21, 2010).

The final phrase of verse 3 expresses the importance of remaining united in heart as a people with pride in their identity. “One heart, no matter what, jo’oh, I perform with exaltation and praise.” The introduction of modern conveniences is one possible reason for communal decline. After getting electricity, villagers did not have to gather around a fire to keep warm. They could be occupied in their own
individual activities such as weaving or woodcarving. In today’s cosmopolitan world, they can even surf the Internet, virtually tour the globe, and enter into their own "imaginary" worlds through ipods etc. Elliot (2004: 9) purports that the “new individualism” structures the way individuals, organizations, and institutions organize society. I add that these modern developments in turn construct the way humans interact, spreading the culture of individualism further across the globe.

Titah anak Tebung, 40s, (pers. comm., 16 April 2009) lives in Kampung Sungai Salang (sub-village of Kampung Sungai Bumbun) and recounts that the villagers frequently gathered, chatted, sang, and danced at the balai (open-air shed) during the late evenings in the days before the village had electricity. Music then flowed from the house of the late Ahmad Kassim. Proficient at the jule (violin), Ahmad Kassim and his wife, Mijah anak Sakit, who sang to the strumming of her banjeng, serenaded the village with jo’oh and joget songs. Music, song and dance were excuses for late night gatherings. Villagers staggered in and out, and hung around the balai just to be together. Sometimes, the village poets would engage in endless song debates.

In verse 4, Zainuddin asserts that as we care for and value our belongings, so must we be careful and mindful with others. Taking care of valued belongings of family and friends show respect and love for them too. Zainuddin provides a twist in the next line by stating, “remember the ‘bad’ events; be wary of the good.” According to Zainuddin “bad” events are not necessarily disastrous. I suggest that Zainuddin believes that positive and negative events flow in waves. Once the heights of
pleasure or happiness are attained, new challenges set in (Zainuddin Unyan, pers. comm., February 9, 2009). It is an endless cycle.

**Lagu Pera Gunting (Pera Gunting Song)**

**Verse 1-4: Zainuddin Unyan**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hey cokodoh cok meri koh</td>
<td>Hey let’s go to the forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telog cog kanang kabe gaying</td>
<td>To collect rattan for making baskets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hae yok koh ayik le’ei dah</td>
<td>When we return, it is already evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yok haduk hae lehat mo</td>
<td>We rest after returning home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapet tambo berdebuk134</td>
<td>The drum sounds <em>debuk</em> when we hit it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongkok besik berdenting135</td>
<td>The steel sounds <em>denting</em> when we hit it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nohok leh laguk moyang</td>
<td>This is the song of our ancestor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pera Gunting</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log nyireh bakau log bakau</td>
<td><em>Nyireh</em> wood, <em>bakau</em> wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pucuk tanjung kabot pucuk hele</td>
<td><em>Tanjong</em> shoots, pluck <em>paku</em> shoots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samak gerih dikau mak dikau</td>
<td>One heart, no matter what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo’oh sanjung sembah e’ed sembah</td>
<td><em>Jo’oh</em>, I perform with exaltation and praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pera Gunting</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haung do cebo pijag payak pek</td>
<td>Wade across the waters, step on cold mud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayang barang sendiri barang mak gelik</td>
<td>Careful with our belongings, mindful of others too</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bajau beingat elok bergelik</td>
<td>Remember the bad events, be wary of the good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nohok leh pesan dayik moyau</td>
<td>This is the advice from our ancestor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Pera Gunting</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Recorded and transcribed by Clare Chan, 2009)

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134 *Debuk* is the vocables describing drum sound (verse 2)
**Lagu Musang (Musang Song)**

The Musang (civet cat) Song is a cheerful and lively song used alternatively with the Ganding Song, for weddings and dancing. Zainuddin Unyan wrote the lyrics to this tune. The song revolves around people who come and go from the village. The second verse of the song describes the ambitious youth who leave the village to search for their dreams. “Chasing here, chasing there, leaving those who are dear,” sums up the spirit of the young who seek adventure and a better life outside the village. In that process, they leave their parents and loved ones behind. Some become consumed in their life, spending less and less time visiting their family and village friends. This verse also refers to those who leave the village to seek a wife or husband (Julida Uju, pers. comm., July 21, 2009).

The following are two cases that reveal problems in exogamous marriages. They also show that the younger generation has new desires; the young women are not content to be only housewives. They are attracted to the world beyond their village.

**Case 1**
A Mah Meri man in his 30s is ready for marriage but has not found a suitable partner. After asking around, there is a response from a Mah Meri in a village on the peninsula. She is an adopted child. He travels to meet her and both are agreeable to the marriage. After marriage, the girl in her late teens, does not cooperate with the housework, she does not wash his clothes or help to cook. She spends much time on her cell phone, hangs out at the sundry shop in the village and her favorite meals are burgers. One day, she follows someone in a car who has a job for her in town and leaves without a word. (Clare Chan, fieldnotes, 2009)

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135 *Denting* is the vocable for steel bars struck together (verse 2)
Case 2
The grandfather of a Mah Meri girl in her late teens takes her to another Mah Meri village on the peninsula to marry an eligible bachelor there. The couple have a child, but he, apparently, is afflicted with psychological problems. She leaves him and comes home to the village. The baby is left with the grandparents in the other village. Her family encourages her to dance, weave, and participate in village odd jobs, but she wants to be independent and work. A woman approaches her for help to babysit. She runs off without informing the family. (Clare Chan, fieldnotes, 2009)

Lagu Musang (Musang Song)
Verse 1-5: Zainuddin Unyan

Mui nidei senkang met
Dayik dinong jagai sampai cincop
Ayik nohok kabe jo’oh
Laguk Moyang sembah, e’ed sembah

Beluh huki beluh ohok
Hak ming takey hik karak
Bekedo lep karak kampung
Karak laman karak, karak wayih

Cug diyau, cug segak
Kaberk log mahang kabe pangar
Cok huki hengkik bediyau
Cok ohok haga hengkik haga

Bungak tep’es bungak melor
Petik mui kuntum karak tangkai
Ngagak lepe benggak maluk
He mak penonton lamai celeu lamai

My eyes cannot shut one night
Awake from night till dawn
Today, we perform jo’oh
We present our ancestral songs, we present

Chasing here, chasing there
Leaving those who are near
Marry a wife, leave the village
Leave home, leave your relatives

Dikau cane, segak cane
Tie the mahang wood to make an altar
Traveling there, we realize
Traveling here, we desire

The tep’es flower, the melor flower
Pluck one bunch, leave one stem
Make a mistake, carry shame
Many people watch

(Recorded and transcribed by Clare Chan, 2009)
Exogamous marriages occur more frequently between the Mah Meri and other Orang Asli. Many Mah Meri have moved away from Kampung Sungai Bumbun to live in other Orang Asli villages. Some have married Muslims and converted to Islam. This practice is more frequent in Kampung Tanjong Sepat, a coastal town on the peninsula surrounded by a multi ethnic community. Those who leave the village leave their families and relatives to live far away. This song reflects their nostalgic sentiments and memories of life in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. It reminds people of their parents, their origins, and their homeland. It also creates awareness of Mah Meri cultural identity, reminding people that as more Mah Meri leave to marry into other groups, their identity as a people begins to wither, their customs and identity merging into those of other groups. The last verse reminds the Mah Meri to adhere to custom and not embarrass their families by violating Mah Meri moral values, including loyalty to marriage and responsibility to family and village.

Lagu Sidud (Sidud Song)

The first verse consists of a poem composed by Samah Seman. Maznah remembered this poem and inserted it as the first verse of the song. Zainuddin wrote the rest of the song texts. The core message in this song is to work hand in hand. It reminds the community to follow advice and to learn to work as a village. The people need to gather, discuss general matters and problems, and decide on goals beneficial to the village. It advises the villagers to avoid the growing individualism developing in the village, to walk hand in hand together, not to
deviate from the path, and not to be proud or disobedient. According to Zainuddin, 

tangkos (verse 4) means not to go off course, to be more focused in accomplishing 
goals (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., April 22, 2009)

_Lagu Sidud (Sidud Song)_
Verse 1: Samah Seman
Verse 2-5: Zainuddin Unyan

_Hentok bakar, hentok manggan_
_Gulai hengkik bangar mui bangar_
_E’ed khabar hik ngan_
_Kaluk kop samak pakat samak_

The _bakau_ banana, the _mangan_ banana
Make him one cauldron, one cauldron
I have advised but he ignores
If possible, let’s work together

_Keteb bungak hak paguk_
_Pakai baju biru kala biru_
_Main Jo’oh dek maluk_
_Hengkik yok negeri hengkik rindu_

Plant flowers, place on the rack
Wearing a blue shirt
Don’t be shy to perform the Main Jo’oh
They will miss us when they return home

_Hentok manggan gulai mui bangak_
_Po’oh ngale po’oh hengkik jagung_
_Hae pakat biar samak_
_Asik ayik nangguh dek nanggung_

The _mangan_ banana, stew one pot
Boil cassava, boil corn
Let’s make decisions together
Do not procrastinate or we will have to bear responsibility

_Jog kirik jog kanan_
_Sama-samak langkah dek tangkos_
_Yok negerik karak kenangan_
_Dek samak megah dek legos_

Left leg, right leg
Walk together, don’t go off track
Return home with memories
Do not be proud, do not disobey

_Pasang kambok tengah pidei_
_Po’oh ngale ka tenggerik_
_Hae siang emboh tengah dedei_
_Main Jo’oh ale hae al_

Put out the mosquito net during the night
Boil cassava mackerel fish
We can wait for you, but you can’t wait for us
Perform the Main Jo’oh one more time

(Recorded and transcribed by Clare Chan, 2009)
Batin Sidin told of an incident where he believes someone had swindled money for personal gains. This person accepted money from the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) to plant seedlings of the *nyireh* and pandanus tree. Batin Sidin anak Bujang, the village head states that this individual did not consult the village council and planted the seeds on land that actually belonged to the *Yayasan Selangor* (Selangor Foundation). Eventually, the foundation destroyed all the new plants. He remarks:

Don’t blame me (the village head), big decisions like that should have been brought up and discussed at the village council. If it were consulted, I would have first enquired whether we had permission to plant on that land. If it is forest reserve area, then it is all right. This individual planted the *nyireh* seedlings, took photos for proof of implementation, then claimed the money and kept it for himself (Sidin Bujang, pers. comm., February 14, 2009).

The metaphor of the huge cauldron appears again in this song. A cauldron full of hot young green banana *gulai* (gravy, stew) is divided into small bowls for the villagers. The huge cauldron embodies the notion of communality, sharing in the village struggles and hardships, or catastrophe that might affect the community. The first verse suggests an adult-teenager relationship in which the young sometimes fail to heed the advice of the old. In Verse 1, the older grumbles, “I have advised, but he ignores, if possible, let’s work together.” The third verse tells the Mah Meri not to procrastinate or postpone accomplishing things that need to be done. To postpone work results in inefficiency and slows down progress.

Batin Sidin Bujang, 60s, the village head of Kampung Sungai Bumbun laments, “Nowadays, the unhealthy ways are plenty.” Alcoholism is one of the problems inherent among Mah Meri males. Batin Sidin says, “we have advised them for their own benefit, but they rarely accept our advice.” Alcohol used to be a
common drink made from fermented fruit. It was not uncommon for Mah Meri to be intoxicated during joyous celebrations (Chapter 3). However, with the easy access to cheap and low quality alcohol sold at the Indian sundry shop on the island, some men and boys have become alcoholics. Some drink for fun and some to forget their problems, a constant complaint among the villagers.

Verse 4 tells the people to walk together, to be united in village goals and not to “go off-track.” It reminds them to be humble always and not proud. The last verse communicates a passionate concern from the older to the younger generation. It states, “we can wait for you, but you can’t wait for us”. It speaks of the elders who are patient and tolerant with the young; it speaks of parents who dedicate their time and love to their children, those who are there when their children fall ill or cry. However, as these parents age, the young generation becomes impatient with them. They leave home, parents, and siblings in search of adventure and in pursuit of wealth. They become engrossed with their new friends and the bright, attractive lights of the city blur their vision. Filial piety is pushed aside for individual achievement (Julida Uju, pers. comm., July 24, 2009).

The contemporary Mah Meri community suffers from a lack of communication and united goals. The community system is breaking down due to the life style introduced by modernization. As individuals leave to work in cities and towns, they become disconnected from the struggles and plights of the village. The introduction of consumerism in Malaysia’s capitalist system has resulted in financial problems. Villagers become meticulous about money, because it has become a source of survival today. Some Mah Meri have become entrepreneurs by setting up
small holdings to collect and sell palm oil harvested by their fellow villagers. Others have sundry shops in the village or invest in breeding fresh-water fish. As each Mah Meri finds ways to survive, they become driven by personal individualistic goals.

Today, many Mah Meri teenage girls and boys own cellphones. They are popular multi-functional gadgets that connect them to the global arena. Their phone usually has a library of games, MP3s, and photos. They use Bluetooth technology to get music from their friends or go to a telecommunications center nearby to transfer music from CDs to their cellphones due to the cost. The teens use cellphones less for making calls or sms (text-messages).

Figure 5.2. Mah Meri men (late teens and 20s) (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figure 5.3. The cell phone phenomenon (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
**Lagu Balaw (Balaw Song)**

This song text combines a poem composed by Ranggun Seman and the contemporary text composed by Zainuddin Unyan. It combines memories of the ethos of the Mah Meri community—one that treasures family, kinship and friendship bonds. The first verse states that friendships are precious, carefully nurtured so as not to be broken. If we have become friends, then we should keep in touch, remember, and care for one another. When one initiates by writing after a parting, we become friends again, it says (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., July 24, 2009).

The last line of the second verse voices the mengge's (elder's) concerns about the young generation. It urges children to come and seek advice from them, especially when they are still alive and able—the voice of the elders reaching out to the young. The Mah Meri in their late teens and those in their early twenties are tempted into a global capitalist system that their culture and surroundings have only begun to reflect. Unable to compete, they are economically insecure as they move between odd or unstable jobs, and part-time wage labor. Socially and psychologically affected, some rebel and find unhealthy ways of escaping the problems they suffer due to government economic policies, ambitious ideals, and the notion of a progressive society.
The youth in their twenties are the villagers that encounter the most problems. They are the transitional group between a sea-forest livelihood and one based on technology and mass communication. The problems include lepaking (loitering), alcoholism, materialism, and dependency. Exposure to the media and its unhealthy content has also augmented social and moral problems.

Today the young boys laze around, lepak (loiter) around, and watch television all day. We have advised the young, but they pretend not to hear. In the past, once our bodies matured, we already were 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 (Yahya Sidin, pers. comm., July, 14, 2009)
**Lagu Balaw (Balaw Song)**

1st-3rd verse by Zainuddin Unyan

4th verse by Ranggun Seman

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goi cawan delem edeq pecah</th>
<th>Bring the cup slowly, don't break it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nasik pulut hak parak holoq</td>
<td>Place the glutinous rice on the rack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaluk kawan edeq leh pisah</td>
<td>If we are friends, don't part then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hik jemput hey kawan ala</td>
<td>We are friends again if you keep in touch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Petik sireh kat tepi perigi</th>
<th>Pluck betel leaves beside the well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tepi ubi cincang kena cincang</td>
<td>The sides of the cassava are sliced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orang ramai tangkap ayam jinak</td>
<td>Everyone is catching wildfowl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kita dekat sini lagi, bincang kita bincang</td>
<td>We are still near, let's discuss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kayuh perahu nak pergi hulu</th>
<th>Paddle the boat upstream</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burung murai berkicau hari hujan</td>
<td>The magpie sings during a rainy day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagi esok ada orang datang</td>
<td>The next morning someone will arrive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hendak melawat orang kita</td>
<td>To visit our people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tebas belukar kena senget tebuan</th>
<th>Trim bushes stung by a hornet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ambil kayu mahang buat pangar</td>
<td>Bring <em>mahang</em> wood to build an altar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lepas hari ni, kamu jangan datang</td>
<td>You are not welcome after today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lain hari jangan nak lagi</td>
<td>Do not come again</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pokok ceri kuali belanga kuali</th>
<th>The <em>ceri</em> tree, pan pot pan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebus ubi tepi sungai</td>
<td>Steam cassava beside the river</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulau Carey Memang bertuah</td>
<td>Carey Island is very lucky?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Jooh kita buat</td>
<td>We perform the Main Jo’oh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Recorded and transcribed by Clare Chan, 2009)
Lagu ‘Ari Moyang (‘Ari Moyang Song)

The ‘Ari Moyang Song was composed by Zainuddin Unyan in 2009 for the ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day) celebrations. The act of composing a song to propitiate the guardian spirit of the village shows that an animistic worldview is still practiced by some Mah Meri. This day is one of the few events that bring the Mah Meri together as a community. The villagers work together to weave bunga moyang (plaited nipa) to decorate the rumah moyang (moyang house) two weeks preceding the event. They also gather to make sweet coconut desserts, such as sagun and koleh (verse 2) and ketupat (glutinous rice wrapped in young coconut leaves) On the day itself, the Mah Meri gather at the rumah moyang to propitiate their guardian spirit. They visit each other’s houses, drink and celebrate after the ritual is carried out. ‘Ari Moyang is a popular tourist event that Tourism Malaysia’s website describes as one of the attractive events to attend.136

The ‘Ari Moyang Song is the only contemporary song that is monothematic, and whose title suggests what it exemplifies (problem of taxomony is discussed at the beginning of the chapter). On this day, the Mah Meri propitiate Moyang Gadeng, the guardian spirit of Kampung Sungai Mata. Verse 5 mentions the guardian spirits of each sub village, namely, Moyang Gadeng of Kampung Sungai Mata, Moyang Amai of Kampung Sungai Salang, and Moyang Keteg of Kampung Bumbun. Besides this, there is also Moyang Keramat, the guardian of Jugra Hill. This song reveals the belief

system that space is shared between two worlds, the supernatural and natural; therefore permission or respect for space is crucial in observing the concepts of *tulah* and *kemali* (Chapter 2 and Appendix A). Verses 2, 3, and 5 address the *moyangs* propitiated.

Titah Tebung says, “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, the *joget* is less performed as a community or even for recreation. The ‘*Ari Moyang*’ celebration shows that the village still maintains faith in its worldviews.

Although we go to the clinics when we get sick, we still offer prayers to *Moyang Amai* at the *moyang* house. We burn candles, place *hion* (joss-stick) and *kemian* (incense) in his house once in a while. When we have time, we make rice, *pulut* (glutinous rice), *kuh* (cakes), coffee, tobacco leaves, cigarettes and *sempil tembakau* (rolled tobacco) and place it on his *pangar* (altar). (Titah Tebung, pers. comm., April 16, 2009)

Figure 5.6. Pion Bumbung preparing offerings for Moyang Gadeng (human-like figure in center) during ‘*Ari Moyang*’ (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
Lagu ‘Ari Moyang (‘Ari Moyang Song)
Lyrics: Maznah Unyan
Composer: Zainuddin Unyan

Mui minggu ayik moyang tibak
Gadek dara yek gomok kerjak sama
Gauk gomoh anyam daun
Be cip be bunga bomba
Hauk sagun hauk koleh
Hae menyambut ayik moyang
Ayik nisop ayik moyang
Ayik nohok hae nehei pangar melikat

Jagai mui nidei sengkang met
Siap lauk lebus tupat bersamak
Lamai mak cok mui tempat
Haga nehei moyang Gadeng

Kadei kenin hurok nium
Ain tupat ain lauk ain dou
Mak lek ming haga nehei moyang
Nehei sijuk nehei siao tambah kelat

Moyang Gadeng, Moyang Amai, Moyang Keteg
Lupak ngot Moyang Keramat

Samak celei, hae ayik nohok Moyang
Hai selamat, selamat Lagu Moyang!

(Recorded and transcribed by Clare Chan, 2009)
Summary

This chapter shows that there is a conscious desire to resist the effects of modernization and globalization through the content of song texts. Although modern hegemonies lure people to a more comfortable life, the Mah Meri who have been encultured in indigenous wisdom, *adat* (custom), and worldviews see the new ways of their children as problems. Comparing their lifestyles with those of the young, the older Mah Meri see some of the younger generation as unproductive and directionless. Adults measuring youth through past values are common in all societies. The strengths of the modern generation are yet another perspective to be examined. But although this chapter seems to lament the present, it is from the perspective of those creating the song texts, which seek to ground Mah Meri children in indigenous wisdom and values that can form the shields needed for the challenges the younger generation will face in the future. How that generation uses these values will depend on them.

In the next chapter, I examine how the Mah Meri construct the Main Jo’oh in response to national policies of assimilation, integration, and tourism. The Mah Meri name the native flora and fauna as well as introduced ornamental plants and flowers and domesticated animals to assert place and presence in the costume, props, dances and song texts of the contemporary era. Some of the songs used to elaborate Mah Meri assertion of identity are similar to those in this chapter. Since the content of contemporary song is multi-thematic, a variety of issues is addressed, besides those discussed in this chapter.
Chapter 7

RECONSTRUCTING THE MAIN JO’OH: STAGING AUTHENTICITY THROUGH PLACE AND PRESENCE

If we are economically significant to the country, they won’t take our land away and resettle us. This is why our culture, music and dance, woodcarving and weaving are even more important to us now. (Julida Uju, pers. comm. July 15, 2009)

I am more attuned to my own people, language, culture, custom and beliefs. It is not that I am not interested in the communities outside; I believe the Malay language is our national language and we need to learn it, however I am more inclined toward my own culture. If I do not believe and support my own people, who will? If I am weak, how can I transmit my beliefs to my own children and grandchildren? The Mah Meri identity is first in my heart; others—whether Malay, Chinese, Indian are second place. (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009)

The comments above embody contemporary Mah Meri concerns regarding ancestral land and ethnic identity as Mah Meri sense of identity intertwines with their geographical space and ecological niche. To detach them from their territory would result in a transformation of their spiritual, economical, and social values. This is actually, subtly taking place through the nation-state’s development and assimilation policies for the Mah Meri.

Place and presence of the Mah Meri are two aspects threatened as Malaysia strives towards the status of a fully developed nation, as envisaged in its Vision 2020 (Abdul Hamid 1993). In line with this vision are development programs and assimilation policies implemented for the Orang Asli. Development schemes create tension and contest with the traditional territory of the Orang Asli, while
assimilation policies threaten the perpetuation of indigenous ethnicities. These goals have affected the livelihood and identity of the Orang Asli in peninsular Malaysia, transforming their subsistence livelihood to dependence on wage labor (Dentan & Endicott 1997, Nicholas, 2000, Mohd Tap 1990, Gomes 2007). The situation calls for measures, protocols, and codes of ethics to be developed and enforced to protect the land, rights, interests, and cultural heritage of the Orang Asli.

In Chapter 6, I analyzed how the Mah Meri responded through song texts to modernization and globalization, stimulated by national policies as part of the modernizing process for the Orang Asli. In this chapter, I turn to stage presentation to examine how the Mah Meri construct the Main Jo’oh, their performing traditions, in response to national policies of assimilation and integration, together with the growth of the tourism industry. I frame these aspects using voices in addition to my own—those of Mah Meri and tourists. While national policies stimulate the assertion of ethnic identity, the tourist industry sought a difference from the homogenizing modern world. I argue that while the Mah Meri tailor the Main Jo’oh to assert their identity in response to the homogenizing visions of a bangsa (race or nation) Malaysia and the “authenticity” sought by tourists, they also subconsciously accommodate global consumers of the modern world characterized in analysis as McDonaldization (Ritzer 1993) and Disneyization (Bryman 2004); the society of spectacle (Debord 1994); Baudrillard’s (1994) “aura;” and Marx’s (1992) “commodity fetishism.”
Comparing the Main Jo’oh in three periods—early 1900s, late 1900s, and early 2000s—I discuss how certain elements of visual representation and song texts are retained, eliminated, and innovated, utilizing postmodern and globalization theories. This chapter begins with the context of Mah Meri identity as part of the nation state, the nation-state’s visions, the Mah Meri’s own sense of identity, the staging of authenticity for tourists, and a summary of tourist responses to the Main Jo’oh. Following that, I compare the changes in the props, costumes, dances, and song texts of the Main Jo’oh in the early 1900s, late 1900s and early 2000s. Finally, I examine how the Mah Meri construct the Main Jo’oh, to emphasize their place and presence, as well as to tailor it to the tourist gaze (Urry 1990).

**Place and Presence**

The construction of the “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) strives to integrate the diverse people into a common culture. Minority cultures are integrated into the larger culture in superficial ways wherein dress, art, music, and food are represented as the culture itself. However, these policies sometimes lead to ethnocide and destruction of culture (Robbins 1999, 271). As fast as the government tries to forge national unity, to link unknown peoples together in imagined political communities, discrete ethnic groups resist, subtly or overtly, by marking, their individual difference (Sarkissian 2000, 1). Even if there is conformance, Naisbitt states:

> there are unmistakable signs of a powerful countertrend: a backlash against uniformity, a desire to assert the uniqueness of one’s culture and language, a repudiation of foreign influence. (Naisbitt 1990, 119)
Nicholas states "Orang Asli cultures are derived from the specific ecological niche in which the community resides in, intimately intertwining the place with the people" (Nicholas 2000, 15). The identification of a place with names of mythic heroes or cultural icons is evidence of a people and a presence; therefore, the perpetuation of oral traditions through contemporary practice, documentation, or legal recognition are ways to protect the Mah Meri from forced resettlements or identity disintegration. Furthermore, the ability to connect an oral tradition to existing natural or geographical features, such as how places came to be named, is often accepted as evidence contributing to the primal presence in that area (Nicholas 2004, 20). For example, the Semai have a tale regarding the naming of the rock Baretchi (elephants flat land) in Ulu Telom, Perak which can be used evidence may be used a claim to ancestral territory (ibid., 2).

I am uncertain whether the Mah Meri have any sustainable natural geographical “monuments” in their village connected to a legend, but I was told that they believe that by generating economic returns for the tourism industry, the government will not hastily resettle them.137 The Mah Meri are aware that it remains their responsibility to ensure the perpetuation of their cultural heritage, strengthening their place and presence in the country (ibid., 26).

The next section consists of personal reflections regarding the Mah Meri sense of identity told primarily in their own voices. In addition to being internally triggered, I believe that the Mah Meri perspective of their place in the country has

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137 The Mah Meri woodcarvings of masks and sculptures, woven baskets and accessories are also important tourism commodities today.
been influenced by Orang Asli activists and indigenous people’s movements, such as the Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia (JOAS)\textsuperscript{138} and Peninsula Malaysia Orang Asli Association (POASM).\textsuperscript{139} These movements are linked with global indigenous movements that strive to protect their rights.

**Mah Meri Sense of Identity**

The members of the Main Jo’oh troupe of Kampung Sungai first traveled by air in July 2007, when they flew to Kuching, Sarawak for the 10\textsuperscript{th} Annual Rainforest World Music Festival (13\textsuperscript{th}-15\textsuperscript{th} July 2007) in Malaysia.

Performing at a foreign location, the Mah Meri were careful to adhere to their *adat* (customs). During the performance, Batin Sidin anak Bujang fumigated the four angles of the stage with *kemian* (benzoin, resin), requesting their *moyang* to seek permission from the spirit of Princess Santubong to perform in her territory. He also bathed musicians and dancers, musical instruments and masks with *kemian*, enabling their faces to be visible to the spirit. The “backstage” (MacCannell 1976) was thus performed for the audience. After the festival, the Mah Meri insisted on bringing home the sacred *busut* (mound)\textsuperscript{140} and their costumes woven from fresh nipa (*nypa fructican*) to be discarded at home. It was most important that the *busut* came home. (Fieldnotes, Clare Chan, July 14, 2007)

Entrenched in symbolism, the *busut* stands as an important representation of Mah Meri cosmology and worldview. It is a symbolic representation of a people, culture, and ethnic identity. The sacred treatment of the *busut* demonstrates Mah Meri sentiment toward their custom and ethnic identity.

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\textsuperscript{138} Jaringan Orang Asal Se-Malaysia (JOAS)
\textsuperscript{139} Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (POASM)
\textsuperscript{140} The *busut* (mound) represents the sacred mountain encircled by the first Mah Meri siblings in their myth of origin (see Chapter 2).
During my interaction with the Mah Meri musicians and dancers, I was struck by their intense assertion of a distinctive ethnic identity, their desire to maintain the cultural heritage of their moyang, and their deep respect for their ancestral customs and worldviews. On ethnic identity:

We must defend Mah Meri music; prioritize our music and cultural heritage. If not, people will say we are just like others, that we don’t have our own culture, heritage and religion. (Rosiah anak Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009)

We need to promote our own musical traditions. The Main Jo’oh is the main thing that belongs to us. It’s not that we reject modern music, but that music is the property of others. We don’t want our people to think that outsiders produce good music; and ours is of poor quality or bad. We must treasure our own music, if we don’t, who is going to? (Sidin Bujang, pers. comm., February 14, 2009)

Some Malays say we don’t have our own religion; they say we don’t have our own principles, that we are empty. Actually, we have our own worldviews, customs, rituals, and taboos . . . it’s because they do not know and don’t care. If they would like to learn about us, that’s good. (Julida Uju, pers. comm., July 15, 2009)

Maznah anak Unyan, the leader of the Main Jo’oh troupe, expresses her passionate desire to assert the uniqueness of the Mah Meri people, even in the face of controversy and criticism from her own village on the bastardization of their culture on stage.

Even if my own people criticize me, I will not reject my duty. I will perform to the best of my ability, not only for my community but also to share and exchange knowledge about our cultural traditions with other communities. I want to show that the Mah Meri have their own unique customs and culture, which are not imitations of others’ culture. (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., 22 July 2009)

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141 There are three possible ways to understand the term moyang (as explained in Chapter 2). It can be referred to the spirits of Mah Meri ancestors, spirits of plants and animals, or to supernatural beings. Supernatural beings do not resemble any specific form. Describing them is subjective—some describe them as ogrelke, hideous, or exotic.
We, the Mah Meri, will always be Mah Meri, even though there is development and modernization. Yes, there is change, but the old still remains. We are more attuned to our own race. If we lose our language, what more do we have? People won’t respect show toward us anymore. (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., 22 July 2009)

The Mah Meri believe that their ancestors and village guardian spirits are constantly guarding and protecting them. It is essential to respect the environment shared among humans and supernatural beings, as one differentiated by existing in the human and supernatural dimensions.

Although outsiders may easily cheat the illiterate, the moyang already knew we would face future predicaments. That is why they passed down woodcarving for the men and weaving patterns for the women. With the little our ancestors knew, they foresaw that we might be landless one day. Woodcarving and weaving can be used to make money, even though they do not provide us with luxurious living. Our heritage is useful, it would be a waste for us to throw it away and leave it behind (Rosiah anak Kengkeng pers. comm., March 7, 2010).

These are their reasons for the objectification of their culture and a defined sense of ethnic identity based on recapturing the past, one previously lived and practiced without a need to define, categorize, and canonize. The socio-political atmosphere and its push toward the molding of a people “united in diversity” have created an oppositional reaction to it. The Mah Meri respond by asserting identity in the midst of a growing disintegration of their worldviews, customs and ways of life as a result of political hegemonic pressures.

On the importance of maintaining their cultural heritage:

Even though there are new compositions, we still value and appreciate our ancestors’ heritage. We remember our ancestors through their songs. It is because of them that we have a culture, a heritage. If they had not composed the songs, music and dance, our musical culture would more be influenced by jazz, etc. The strength and spirit of our ancestors is a treasure that is invaluable. (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009)
The following section examines the thriving Malaysian industry of tourism and how the Mah Meri construct the Main Jo’oh for the tourist gaze (Urry 1990, 1). Foregrounded are the voices of tourists who visited the Mah Meri during the ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day) and on other occasions. I suggest that the desires of tourists to experience a pristine environment and strong traditional culture consciously and inadvertently led to the staging of authenticity in the Main Jo’oh.

Tourism in Malaysia

The tourism industry, which began flourishing in the 1970s, stimulated the promotion of cultural diversity. Ironically, this promotion contradicts the construction of a bangsa (race or nation) Malaysia, the “imagined” Malaysian community. To negotiate these contradictions, the notion of “unity in diversity” was created. This created a niche for the promotion of indigenous ethnic minorities as part of the image of a modern, multi-cultural nation whose mosaic of peoples lives in harmony. Simultaneously, global interest in travel, accelerated by enhanced air transportation, results in increasing encounters between tourists and indigenous societies worldwide. Representing a picturesque local color and the vestige of a vanishing lifestyle, the Mah Meri are branded as forest natives. Their handmade costumes and masks, traditional food, and communal life are considered utopian. Aware of this, the Mah Meri reproduce this image by performing the tourist gaze. Increased interest in these niches provides a space for the Mah Meri to assert their identity. Through the Main Jo’oh, their music and dance performance, the Mah Meri construct a unique representation of their identity—adjusting to the changing
desires of larger power structures. This chapter examines the elements retained, eliminated, and innovated in the Main Jo'oh through an analysis of three eras: the early 1900, late 1900s, and early 2000s. The nation-state’s investment in tourism for economic return provides the opportunity for the Mah Meri to position themselves as an important part of the culturally diverse country.

Staging Authenticity for Tourists

MacCannell (1976) theorizes that one of the reasons tourists from modern societies seek indigenous and exotic performances is to relieve the feeling of alienation (Marx 1964) triggered by the effects of a life style resulting from global capitalism. Detached from the fruit of their labor, modern societies seek to reconnect with their inner desires to fill that void by seeking the other, namely communities still perceived to practice subsistence economy.

Modern man has been condemned to look elsewhere, everywhere, for his authenticity, to see if he can catch a glimpse of it reflected in the simplicity, poverty, chastity or purity of others. (MacCannell 1976, 40-41)

MacCannell’s theory of modern man are supported through comments from my recent interviews with foreign and local tourists visiting the ‘Ari Moyang festival on February 25, 2009 (see the section on “Tourist’s View” below). Contemporary phenomena of globalization—such as the construction of dominant ethnicities, homogenization, capitalism, and modernization—have sparked resistance that attempts to rejuvenate the notion of ethnic diversity, heterogeneity, and communal living—as well as the desire to “go green” or “back to the roots.” The Mah Meri play on the cathartic needs of modern communities (Artaud 1976) through their
“authentic” or “traditional” tunes sung in the indigenous language, costumes hand-woven from fresh leaves, simple dances, and exotic masked dancers. “Signs” and “signifiers” (Peirce 1960) that transmit images of pristineness, authenticity and the natural environment embodied in visual spectacles and the sound of Mah Meri music and dance provide temporary relief for modern communities caught in cosmopolitan city life. By experiencing authentic indigenous music and dances, including non-diatonic melody, simple dance movements, “primitive” musical instruments and costumes designed from natural products, tourists feel reassured to know that there are still people connected to their natural abilities.

Baudrillard disagrees with MacCannell, and asserts that the simulation of the “authentic” is the truth about society. He states that modern society has replaced the real world with signs and symbols and these human experiences are a simulation of reality. “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (Baudrillard 1994, 1).
Subconsciously, the staging of authenticity produces an illusion that plays to the modern consumers desire for hyperreality. If Baudrillard’s view that the simulacrum is the truth of modern society is taken into consideration, then the staging of authenticity in the Main Jo’oh is the truth about Mah Meri society. Therefore, performing the tourist gaze (Urry 1990) is what is authentic about the Main Jo’oh.
Tourist Views

Interviews with tourists confirm MacCannell’s theory that some tourists seek places and people with simpler life styles. Below are some comments made by tourists I interviewed during the ‘Ari Moyang celebration in Kampung Sungai Bumbun on the 25 February 2009.

An American tourist said:

I find interesting the homemade instruments. I look around and I see their environment and their surroundings, the happiness and the joy that they have with very little, while in the outside world we have so much and we seem to not be happy, we want more. They have very little, and it’s their happiness here and the joy that they speak of just living in nature, taking what God gives them and making use of it. It’s just beautiful; the costumes made out of bark and out of leaves are absolutely gorgeous. Its handiwork that you don’t often see, and it’s absolutely beautiful (Robin Vaughan, pers. comm., February 25, 2009).

Another American tourist from Chicago stated:

The music is very good, you know I think we all just respond to that beat, which is clear in the majority of the music they make. But what’s so nice about the whole celebration is through the instruments, through the music, through getting ready for this, everyone getting ready for this, everyone contributing to making the costumes, the whole tribe and group of people are working together. It’s not just the men or just the women or children. Obviously the children are always around—this communal the event is so exciting, and everything else is absolutely beautiful (Pam, pers. comm., 2009).

These two tourists emphasize simplicity, communal living, community spirit and solidarity, and handmade products from nature, seeking the “authentic” and finding solace in the simplicity of rural village life. The comments validate MacCannell’s theories regarding tourist interests.
The preservation of traditional culture and performance art detached from the “evils” of commoditization appealed to another foreigner. Others were intrigued with the “natural” fresh-woven costumes involving human labor and woven with patience, effort, and inherited skills. Many foreigners expressed their fascination with a culture so different from their own and not found elsewhere in the world.

An Australian man said, “Interesting that they have kept their culture so close to a rapidly developing business (plantation) and city of Kuala Lumpur.” An Indonesian male observed, “The costume is made of leaves, something natural.” A Jewish visitor commented on the uniqueness of Mah Meri tradition. “Interesting to see the culture and way of life. Very different from ours.” Another Australian opined,” It’s fantastic that this tradition has continued.” A Portuguese female commented on the tranquility of the village, and the happy and joyous music that involved community participation. She said, “it’s great that we can join in, the music
is always happy and people are good-tempered and fun. It is a peaceful environment.” Comments from unidentified tourists include, “The costumes are really beautiful and completely made from cultural material, which I think is fascinating” and “I have never seen anything like this before. It was very interesting to be able to get close to the people.”

The statements above reveal the imagination of outsiders about the life of the Mah Meri after performances during the height of ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day). Many of these tourists seek to experience native people through the tourist “bubble,” (Rojek and Urry 1997, 115): to encounter without immersing, and to take snapshots as souvenirs. The nature of tourism itself is explained by Cohen (1988, 383) “…a form of play, which like all play, has profound roots in reality, but for the success of which a great deal of make-believe on part of both performers and audience, is necessary.” Realizing the nature of tourism, the Mah Meri have begun to reconstruct the Main Jo’oh to the tourist gaze, an experience sought by the type of tourist described by MacCannell. The reconstruction focuses on the “staging of authenticity” (MacCannell 1976), an authenticity based on memories and an imagination of the past, together with invented traditions. Weaving patterns once used for healing rituals now rarely performed were resignified and given new meaning (Geertz 1983) as props or accessories for the dancers’ costumes.

142 Selected responses from questionnaires distributed to foreign and local tourists visiting Kampung Sungai Bumbun between February and July 2009. Some of these interviews come from visitors who attended the ‘Ari Moyang ceremony (February 25, 2009) and a tour organized by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) for foreign exchange students from Portugal, Australia and Bangladesh (July 2009).
143 A safe, controlled environment, out of which they can selectively step to ‘sample’ predictable forms of experiences (Rojek and Urry 1995, 115)
As the Mah Meri stage authenticity for the tourists, they quell their own discomforts regarding the encroaching hegemony creeping in to inundate their communities. This includes threats of declining moral values, and losing land, customs, culture, and identity due to the subtle implementation of national policies of assimilation, development, and modernization. For the Mah Meri, the Mah Meri is a space where they can stake claims to ancestral land based on their heritage of music, song texts, and arts that speak of names and places on Carey Island.

The Main Jo’oh is a powerful vehicle for the assertion of place and presence in the nation-state. In this chapter, I discuss how the Mah Meri reconstruct the Main Jo’oh in trying to recapture a past by resignifying it through costume, dance and props, and naming the native or cultivated flora and fauna, and activities in the village. In addition, these songs fulfill the needs of tourists. Focusing on props, costumes, and dance, I suggest that the visual images conjured up by signs and symbols in the Main Jo’oh stimulate the perception of authenticity and serve two purposes: as tourist attractions and as cultural perpetuators. Finally, I argue that while the Main Jo’oh focuses on nostalgia for the past, it also embodies modern styles of presentation.

For the Mah Meri and others, these modern styles include standardizing, packaging, pastiche and spectacle. Daniel states, “The tourism setting then, provides the space and time for ideal definitions to expand, for play and experimentation at the boundaries with combinations of styles and tradition that reach for innovation, invention, and creativity” (Daniel 1996, 785). Such changes as “reducing the length of performances, minimizing less exciting parts, incorporating audience into the
show, emphasizing exotic and unusual acts, and dressing more colorfully are demonstrated in many performances for tourists” (Connell and Gibson 2005, 147). In Bali, the state of trance, stabbing and devouring of live chickens were eliminated from the Barong dance (Sanger 1986, 13). In the Philippines, the Balitaw, a sung-debate between a boy and girl lasting until one party’s energy is exhausted, became a dance performance staged with “multiple pairs executing identical steps and gestures in a specific floorplan, reflecting symmetry and attractive design . . .” (Trimillos 1986, 112). The girls of Kiribati danced topless in order to stage authenticity during the Third South Pacific Arts Festival (Marion 1988, 143).

Continuity, Change, and the Staging of Authenticity

The Main Jo’oh has undergone many changes in the span of a century. The four elements examined are props, costumes, dances, and song texts from three periods: the early 1900s, late 1900s, and early 2000s. The changing ecology, livelihood and life style, national policies, and tourism all impact these elements.

Props

Busut (Mound)

In the early 1900s, Skeat and Blagden described a man known as, Penghulu Lempar (penghulu: head, Lempar: name) constructing a mound

The height of a man’s waist and in the shape of a truncated cone, surmounted by a small glove and knob, so that it was not unlike a gigantic bell and bell-handle. Around the mound were planted half a dozen long stems of “Owl-flower;” to thee were added several blossoming stems of wild red “Singapore” rhododendron, and to these were again added some shoots of fan palms and other kinds of palms. A bunch of artificial “flowers” manufactured from strips of kepau (fan-palm) leaf intended to represent the sun; nyiru (coconuts); nooses or “earrings;” the blossom of the wild “sealing-
wax” palm and the blossom and fruit of a remarkable wild tree-nut with boat-shaped sail, called by the Malays the “sail-fruit” or “fill-cup”. Newly plucked spray of the wild (Singapore) rhododendron was inserted into the knob-like summit of the mound, and a plait of festoon of the same material, decorated with long streamers, encircled the mound just below the upper rim of the truncated portion (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 72-73).

![Large bell-shaped mound of clay used in the mound-marriage ceremony](image)

Note: Large bell-shaped mound clay used in the mound-marriage ceremony. This mound was thrown up and shaped as above in my presence by one of the Besisi chiefs at Ayer Itam, Kuala Langat. It is round a mound of this shape (not an ant-heap as alleged) than the Jakun bridegroom formerly had to chase his bride three times.

Figure 6.2. Early 1900s: The marriage mound or “ant heap” for bride capture rituals. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 70)

The wild red Singapore rhododendron is a common shrub with reddish stems and bristly scales. The fan palm refers to the kepau plant, endemic to lowland seasonal swamps. The native sealing wax palm is originally from Malaysia,

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144 Scientific name: *Cyrtostachys renda* (Soepdamo 1998, 116)
146 Common name: fan palm; Malay name: kepau; scientific name: *Pholidocarpus macrocarpus*
but has been introduced worldwide from Costa Rica. Often seen in Chinese homes, it
is favored for its bright scarlet leaf sheaths, believed to be auspicious (Soepdamo
1998, 116). The “sail fruit” or “fill cup” is shaped like a boat and literally translated
as _selayar_ or _kembang semangkuk_\(^{147}\) (Figure 6.3). The common feature of these
plants is that they are native to Malaysia.

The “artificial leaves” (Figure 6.3) described by Skeat and Blagdens are
traditional nipa-plaited _bunga moyang_ (spirit flowers). These leaf woven
decorations, as well as fresh flowers are inserted into the marriage mound or clay
ant heap (Figure 6.2). During the later 1900s, the earth mound has been modified
into what Nowak described as a light bamboo frame cone-shaped structure covered
in woven “centipede plaits” (known today as _dendan lipan_) or nipa plaits (Nowak
1987, 50). Leaves from other plants, including turmeric, citrus and pandanus, are
also used to cover the structure, with red hibiscus flowers completing it. Werner’s
photographs and illustrations show a circular space demarcated by candles placed
on bamboo stands, named the _busut jantan_ (male mound)(Figure 6.4 and 6.5).

\(^{147}\) Scientific name: _scaphium linearicapum_ (Soepdamo 1998, 122)
Note: Marriage decorations of plaited leaf strips. These are the actual specimens inserted by Besisi in the “marriage mound.” They represent “earrings,” or nooses for snaring demons (two bunches in centre), blossom-spathes of wild “sealing-wax” palm (on left), and “sail fruit” blossom, coconuts and suns (“matahari,” the latter star-like objects on long stems). At the top is the festoon or plait referred to in text. Similar objects are used at ceremonial dances.

Figure 6.3. The “artificial leaves” (known as bunga moyang in the early 2000s) inserted in to the marriage mound (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 70)
The contemporary busut exhibits further changes. On February 25, 2009, a busut was decorated with candles and flowers such as red hibiscus and purple bougainvillea (Figure 6.6) during ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day) ceremonies. The hibiscus is Malaysia’s national flower, but ironically it is believed to have originated from China and Indochina. The bougainvillea is also a decorative shrub for urban
areas, native to Central and South America. It has since been hybridized in Malaysia (Soepdamo 1998, 83). Here, the busut jantan retains the candles, and bunga moyang (plaited nipa leaves) from the busut of the late 1900s.

Figure 6.6. Early 2000s: Busut jantan at ‘Ari Moyang Festival, 25 February 2009. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Besides the busut jantan (male mound), a separate knee-high portable triangular mound was made from bamboo frames and decorated with dendan lipan (centipede plaits), dendan jering (jering plaits) and bunga bintang (star flowers) (Figure 6.8). The decorations on the contemporary mounds are flexible and sometimes include introduced ornamental fresh garden flowers as well as specially woven bunga moyang (spirit flowers) of nipa (Figure 6.7). The differences in the decorations and the structure of the busut during these three periods (early 1900s, late 1900s, early 2000s) reflect change in the ecological system and landscape of Kampung Sungai Bumbun. As it grew into a village settlement, ornamental flowers were introduced to beautify the area. Fruits and vegetables were planted for consumption and commercial value. The depletion of mangrove and lowland
rainforest and oil palm development contributed to the scarcity of some materials. The construction of a portable mound in the late 1900s reflected the resignification of the Main Jo’oh from ritual enactment to stage presentation. The Mah Meri have adjusted the *busut* to accommodate their participation in the tourism business. For the contemporary Main Jo’oh performers who take their “culture on tour,” (Rojek and Urry 1997), performing on stage platforms, the ant-heap or earth-mound was no longer practical. The portable mound facilitated more consistent performances in venues beyond the village.

![Figure 6.7. *Bunga moyang* (spirit flowers)– *cip* (birds) and *subang* (festoon of rings-in the center). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)](image)
Figure 6.8. *Bunga jering* (*jering* flowers) and *bunga bintang* (star flower—in the center).(photo by Clare Chan 2009)

Figure 6.9. Early 2000s: *Busut* (mound) decorated with nipa-plaited flowers, known as *bunga moyang* (*bunga bomba and keris*) and fresh hibiscus flowers. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figure 6.10. Early 2000s: *Busut* (mound) decorated with nipa-plaited flower, known as *bunga moyang*. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
Costumes

Costumes have also changed to accommodate the new performance context.

In the early 1900s, Skeat and Blagden described the costumes of the male and female dancers during the “Drumming in the Tribal Hall” (Balai Berentak) performance.

The man’s headdress on festive occasions consisted among the Besisi of a plaited palm-leaf (*licuala*) fillet or headband, from which depended a row of long fringe-like streamers (called “centipedes feet”), so that his face was almost entirely hidden as he danced. Besides this, he wore a similar round about his waist, and a third slung like a bandolier over the shoulder and across the breast. Finally, he had a bunch of artificial leaf-ornaments, consisting of imitation flowers, pendants, nooses, and daggers, inserted in his head-band, and another at his waist, and carried a curious dance-wand, which will be described more below. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 143)

The plaited palm-leaf (*licuala*) has been replaced by nipa plaits, while the centipede’s feet refer to the *dendan lipan* plaits is still used for decorations today.

The “artificial leaf ornament” mentioned by Skeat and Blagden refers to *bunga moyang* (spirit flowers), the nooses are known as *subang* (earrings) and the daggers
refer to *keris* (dagger). The dance wand (Figure 6.2) has been eliminated from today's Main Jo’oh.

The female attire is also described:

The woman's head dress (Figure 6.11) on similar occasions consisted of a plaited palm-leaf head-band, lacking the streamers, in place of which was furnished with little upright spikes, on which were spitted sweet-smelling flowerets or leaves, whose fragrance thus became pleasantly diffused throughout the room. The rest of the attire was similar to the men’s. (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 144)

![Late 1900s: male headdress. (Werner 1997, 72)](image1)

![Late 1900s: Jo’oh female dancers performing the Pera Gunting Song. (Werner 1997, 71)](image2)

In the 1970s, the Main Jo’oh was an integral part of weddings, festivals and ‘*Ari Moyang* (Ancestral Day). The women wore long-sleeved floral blouses and *batik* skirts (Figure 6.14), while the men wore long-sleeved, collared batik shirts with long pants. Musicians and dancers wore simple *songkho* (headdresses), *simpang* (sashes).
and dendan (skirts) woven from leaves over their best clothes. These nipa woven adorments were added to beautify the dancer. The original function of the nipa plaits in healing ceremonies has been resignified into decorative patterns for Mah Meri costume.

In the early 2000s, the decorations retained were the headdress, sash and skirt, varied by different types of material and inspired images. Several patterns were created for the skirts: Hawai‘i (plain thin strips), subang (earrings or nooses) and mayang (palm blossom). Maznah says that Junaidah’s mother invented the “Hawaiian” skirt in the 70’s. She says that it resembled the Hawaiian hula skirt and its plaits were finer and woven more closely together (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., 30 August 2010). The same skirt patterns, the mayang and subang described above were made into different hair ornaments attached to a sanggul (bun) (Figure 6.18 and 6.19) The bun originated from the nest attached to the cip (bird) ornaments used as decorations for festivals and ceremonies. The Mah Meri are also clever at inventing new weaving patterns from pre-existing ones for their costumes and accessories. This method resembles the pastiche technique used in composing contemporary song texts.

148 Films and mediated images from Hawai‘i in the late 1900s were popular in Malaysia. Today, adventure series such as “Lost” continue to promulgate exotic images of Hawai‘i.

149 Maznah told me this on a long-distance telephone conversation on the 30 August 2010.
Figure 6.15. Nipa-plaited *dendan Hawai‘i* (Hawaiian skirt). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figure 6.16. Nipa-plaited *dendan mayang* (palm blossom skirt). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figure 6.17. Nipa-plaited *dendan subang* (earring or noose skirt). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figures 6.18. *Mayang* (palm blossom) hair. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figures 6.19. *Subang* (earrings or nooses) hair. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
Many of these hair ornaments originate from *bunga moyang* (*bunga*: flowers; *moyang*: ancestral spirits) used as decorations during healing ceremonies, weddings, and festivals. According to Karim, *bunga moyang* “act as landmarks for the descending spirits to find their way to the earth. The *subang* (earrings or nooses) is a bunch of rings woven together (Figure 6.7) It is a powerful decoration that symbolizes the portal of entry for spirits from the supernatural into the human world, and houses spirits among its rings. Skeat and Blagden referred to the *subang* as “nooses for snaring demons” (Figure 6.3).

![Figure 6.20. Early 2000s: Main Jo’oh costume. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)](image)

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150 *Bunga moyang* patterns are inspired from animals and plants of the earth and sea represent the human world such as the *ka* (traditional fish), *belangkas* (horse-shoe crab), *hudak* (shrimp), and *belalang* (grasshopper). Newly invented *bunga moyang* are the *rama-rama* (butterfly), and *pepatung* (dragonfly) by Maznah Unyan. Tijah invented the *kura-kura* (tortoise) and *keteb* (crab) to represent duality between the animals from the sea and earth in the human world.
The Mah Meri have adapted and developed new weaving patterns from the old weaving patterns of their ancestors. The *subang* skirt style, originated from *bunga moyang*, has been adapted as patterns for the skirt and hair. The adaptation of old weaving patterns from healing ceremonies into the current costumes of the Mah Meri is evidence of cultural continuity. Today, healing ceremonies have almost disappeared and the *bunga moyang* functions have been resignified and given new meaning, moving from the past function of guiding the entry of spirits into this world to current costume decorations intended to assert Mah Meri identity.

New accessories, such as the *bunga jering* (*jering* flower) and *bunga bintang* (star flower) (Figure 6.8), are strung onto the sash and headdress. The *jering* pattern represents the fruit from the *jering* tree found in the Mah Meri village; this tree produces a purplish-brown pods that are suspended coiled from its branches.151 There are also additional ornaments woven to beautify the costumes, such as *anting-anting* (earrings),152 *rantai* (necklaces), and *gelang* (wristbands).

Another important change in the attire is the use of bark tunic made from *kayu terap* (bark wood), which has replaced the *batik* attire of the late 1900s.

Making clothes out of bark cloth is an old tradition, which has long been abandoned. However, the Mah Meri recently revived the use of bark cloth for tunics. This revival however has its limitations, because only a few know the art of making bark cloth. Moreover, deforestation has left the Mah Meri with little access to the

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151 Scientific name: *Pithecolobium lobatum*.
152 Both *anting-anting* and *subang* mean earrings. They are circular in shape and bunched together. Skeat and Blagden (1906) referred to them as “earrings or nooses for snaring demons” (Figure 6.3 and 6.7).
tree and its bark. Nevertheless, each musician and dancer continues to wear a bark cloth tunic as his or her basic costume. The desire to “stage authenticity” triggers the revival of old traditions, combined with contemporary traditions. This is a form of pastiche in which there is a decentralization of time and space. This revival also shows time as cyclical rather than linear.

For the Mah Meri, using materials that represent their heritage, their customs, and traditions are ways of claiming place on Carey Island and a presence in Malaysia. The transference of flora specific to Carey Island into signs and symbols for costumes is an indication of belonging to the land. The traditional use of fresh leaves as costumes during each performance is a problem because of lack of resources. The Mah Meri are worried that they will have to resort to other materials when nipa is exhausted on Carey Island (Chapter 8). In the contemporary era, the costumes of the musicians and dancers have been refined and embellished with accessories fashioned to represent the Mah Meri identity. The weavings have become more intricate. The loosely hanging “streamers” in the headdresses of the early 1900s (Figure 6.11) are replaced with intricate weavings. Palm leaf (licuala) has been replaced by nipa, which is preferred for weaving.

Mah Meri identity is constructed through a manifestation of Carey Island’s flora and fauna, with a nostalgic revival of native plants and flowers. In staging authenticity and creating a more native image to appeal to the tourist gaze, the Main Jo’oh troupe insists on freshly woven young nipa leaves for each performance,

\(^{153}\) During 2009 “1 Malaysia Marriage” event in Kraftangan Malaysia, the Mah Meri tried to purchase some tunics from the Ibanis (an indigenous minority in Sarawak), who they got to know at the event. \(^{154}\) Palm leaf (licuala) is a type of fan palm, a genus of palms commonly found in tropical rainforests of southern Asia, New Guinea and the western Pacific Ocean islands.
giving a modern tinge to these representations—contemporary *bunga moyang* patterns for costumes are more refined, neat, and intricate compared to the dangling streamers in the early 1900s. The dedication to weaving and creating costumes for each performance reveals their insistence on remaining an indigenous people, subsistence-oriented people who resist the web of global capitalism. Julida Uju says that the very desire to weave costumes from fresh leaves reveals the Mah Meri character: one strengthened through hardship and toil as survivors of the sea and mangrove forests (Julida Uju, pers. comm., 21 July 2009). However, the increased use of introduced ornamental flowers to decorate the *busut* (mound) and new weaving patterns based on garden flowers reveal changes in lifestyle.

**Masked Dancers**

There are only a few clues in the writings of the early 1900s about the role of masked dancers: “the songs are not merely chanted, but are also often also acted out” (Skeat and Blagden 1906, 145). The interpretation of the masked dancers was different from that of today. In the late 1900s, Ayampillay describe a tengkeng ceremony in Kampung Tanjong Sepat—during the dance, three boys wearing masks made from *pinang* palm representing an old man, an elephant, and a tiger enter and join in to dance around, sometimes teasing the other dancers. These masked dancers symbolize three *moyang* who have come to witness and participate in the ceremony. The mask of the old man symbolizes that this *moyang* was once a human being. The masks of the elephant and the tiger are explained by a legend which relates how, in former times, these two animals would come to witness the
ceremony, but would never attack the people but simply watch quietly as the Besese were enjoying themselves. When the masked dancers start behaving unnaturally, the Besese knew the moyang had entered the masked dancer, taking the form of an elephant or tiger (Ayampillay 1976, 44-135).

Figure 6.21. Tengkeng Ceremony at Kampung Tanjong Sepat, Kuala Langat, Selangor. (Ayampillay 1976, 146)

During the late 1900s, Karim stated that the masked dancer danced outside two circles, performing “an animal-like prance where the stomach and buttocks are constantly joggled and the hands moved about in an awkward and clumsy manner” (Karim 1981, 116). The dancer acts out the song texts, which describe the physical attributes and exploits of the animals, humans or ogres, with mimicry and gesticulations (ibid.). The masked dancer occasionally stares at the audience or
distracts the female dancers. According to Nowak, “the masked dancers come and go as they please, taking on a prankish or clownish behavior.” The female dancers who remain unperturbed symbolically show that the barriers between human world and supernatural world cannot be crossed (Nowak 2000, 340).

In contrast with the animal representations of the early 1900s, the contemporary masks represent Moyang Jaboi, Moyang Pongkol, Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang, and Moyang Tok Naning (Figures 6.22-6.25). Each manifests a vision of antiquity, mystery, and exoticism. Batin Sidin Bujang confirms the presence of these similar “shy” spirits described by Skeat and Blagden (1906), in Kampung Sungai Bumbun. Sensing the presence of these spirits, the bomoh (shaman) was called to mediate their desires. Once contact was made, these spirits expressed an interest in joining in the music and dance. They wanted to be a part of the Main Jo’oh celebrations. From then onward, the song that was performed when these spirits appeared was named after the spirit (Sidin Bujang, pers. comm., February 14, 2010).

During the evening, these masked spirits suddenly appeared around the paddy fields. The shaman called upon the spirit and enquired its name. It admitted that it was the Jaboi Spirit. We then called the song that was played when it appeared, “Jaboi Song.” This is the same for other spirits too. (ibid.)

This explains why Main Jo’oh songs today concern four spirits, which have become venerated and associated with the Main Jo’oh. During the late twentieth century, masks made from pulai wood were carved to represent these spirits. However, as pulai wood became scarce, who resorted to nyireh batu or nyireh bunga, a type of mangrove wood; however, these resources are gradually diminishing too. The Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun keep these four masks as part of their Main Jo’oh ensemble today, and these four moyang have been the standard
representations of masked characters since the time of the late Unyan Awas, who passed away in the 90s.

Figure 6.22. Early 2000s: Moyang Jaboi. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figure 6.23. Early 2000s: Moyang Tok Naning. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figure 6.24. Early 2000s: Moyang Pongkol. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figure 6.25. Early 2000s: Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
On the issue of contemporary masked dancers’ interpretations, Rosiah Kengkeng says:

In the old days, the masked dancers could be immersed into the character of the Jaboi Spirit and movements because its story repeated all the time. Dancers who knew the Jaboi story know how to act its character. However, most of the younger generation do not know Jaboi’ story, so they just use their own interpretation and movements. It seems like each young dancer has created his own interpretation of Jaboi. I feel that this generation of masked dancers does not really know the Jaboi story. But no matter, since we created these characters, we must perpetuate and maintain the tradition. Even though they lack knowledge of the story of Jaboi, we still continue performing the masked dance. We try our best to expose the story of this spirit as much as possible. (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009)

Jeffrey Gali, 18, has been performing as a masked dancer since he was 12. He feels it is important that Mah Meri tradition be perpetuated. His uncle, Farizal anak Layon, 20, has guided him in the various movements of the masked dancers. Jeffrey tells of his experience as a masked dancer:

Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang is a female, I have to act a bit vain and soft, but I am not very good at that. I like to play Jaboi Spirit, it’s a bit more aggressive. It acts bizarre when people snap photos of it. Its arms have shears, its legs are formed upside down. Tok Naning has a comical character. Pongkol Spirit, it is lazy, it has a lazy face and does not smile. Its character needs to be played by a tall thin person, not someone short. These are stories from the elders. (Jeffry Gali, pers. comm., March 12, 2009)

Razi Gali, 15, another masked dancer states:

The Jaboi Spirit makes comical actions to attract its audience. Its legs are upside down, there are shears on his hands, and during the rainy season, it is afraid water will enter his upside down nose, therefore it hides away during this season. Tok Naning’s hand and feet movements are big, it likes to collect food, animals and things. (Razi Gali, pers. comm., March 12, 2009)

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155 His perspective may be based also on the fact that he is the son of Gali Adam, the gong player, and Julida Uju, the Mah Meri dancer.
Farizal Layon, 21, says he learned the masked character’s movements from his uncle. He first observed the veteran dancers and later created his own interpretation of the character.

Tok Naning, it is smart, aggressive and has a happy character. I don’t really know the full story, doesn’t register in my brain. It does not matter what movements are used, it all depends on the individual. The rhythm of the tambo and tungtung provides us the effect; we dance to the rhythm of these instruments. Jaboi and Tok Naning like to disturb the audience to attract attention. (Farizal Layon, pers. comm., July 15, 2009)

Although the masked dancers have been informed of the story behind the character in the contemporary scene, they actually do not mimic the character of the mask they are wearing. Instead, they play to get the tourists to respond to them. They act within the space on the stage or performance venue, using the technical equipment such as a smoke machine, revolving video camera, stage lights, and other items such as plants, flowers, or decorations to enhance their performance. Masked dancers act surprised or delighted at tourists snapping photos. They make fancy poses in front of the revolving camera and act shocked when smoke from the machines rises up onstage. Spontaneity and improvisation remain an important aspect of the masked dancer’s performance.

While the mimicry of spirits has been retained in the Main Jo’oh, the masks have evolved from palm fronds to pulai wood and mangrove wood. In the late 1900s and early 2000s, spirits of supernatural beings have replaced animal spirits. In the early 2000s, the masked dancers interact with tourists and stage space instead of mimicking the masked character represented as previously.
Dance Movements and Choreography

The dance movements of the late 1900s are described as a part of the Main Jo’oh. Karim states that the males and females form two circles around the busut (mound) (Karim 1981, 116). The females dance in the inner circle, and the men in the outer one. Both circles move counter-clockwise. Clockwise movement is symbolic of the vow against incest. Since male and females move in the same direction, they will not chance upon each other, as the original siblings did. This dance symbolically demonstrates that human marriage should not be incestuous (Nowak 2000, 340).

In early 2000s Main Jo’oh, there are only female dancers and male masked dancers. The female dancers still dance counter-clockwise, but they have created new choreography. The male masked dancers improvise actions not related to the mask they are wearing as they interact with their audience. The male circle has disappeared. Since many males work outside the village today, there is little time for them to practice or take leave from work for shows. Performing commercially limits the number of musicians and dancers on stage. The complications of “red tape,” standardization, consistency, canonized forms, and organizations are becoming more apparent in contemporary practice. One major concern is the division of payment from the sponsors. If there are more participants, each performer gets less of the payment. Division of payment based on labor has become a problem, especially when extra help is needed for specific performances. The Mah Meri have therefore adjusted their dance choreography to conform with the demands of the tourist industry.
Regular performances require a set repertoire. Specific hand movements and foot patterns accompany each song. The jo’oh-style and joget-style music are also differentiated by Mah Meri foot patterns for dances. The various hand movements are accompanied by two (or a combination of) foot patterns—jo’oh-style or joget-style songs. Besides the three-against-two rhythm pattern of joget songs, foot patterns differentiate the jo’oh-style and joget-style songs

**Hand Movements**

Most of the hand movements of the Main Jo’oh songs have little connection with the title or content of the song. However, there are two songs that demonstrate the theme, title, or content of the song. These two songs are Kuwang Kuit Song and Tok Naning Song. Each song has a specific hand movement throughout the song.

**Hand Movements: Lagu Kuwang Kuit (Kuwang Kuit Song)**

The hand movements of the Kuwang Kuit song mimic the flapping of flying fox (lang kuwait) wings, “like the sway of the bakau (mangrove) leaves.” The Tok Naning Song represents this moyang cutting away shrubs and leaves as it rummages through the forests looking for food. The Mah Meri seldom see the flying fox now because of the destruction of the mangrove forests and the decline of hunting activities. According to Julida Uju, the dancers were not happy with the movements for the Kuwang Kuit Song they had inherited from their ancestors. They said they looked like a chicken flapping its wings. Therefore, Julida reinvented the hand movements based on her memories of the physical action of the flying fox soaring
from one tree to another, searching for and feasting on fruit, and hanging upside
down on the trees. She incorporated this idea into the arm gestures (pers. comm., 21
April 2009). This hand movement is accompanied by jo’oh-style and joget-style foot
patterns, recently combined. The hand movements accompanied by the jo’oh
footwork patterns mimic the flying fox flying from tree to tree. The lower arm
swings up and down. This is followed by the lower arm swinging backward while
the palms push out and pause at three positions.

Hand Movements: Lagu Tok Naning (Tok Naning Song)

As described earlier, Tok Naning is a greedy, undecisive moyang who collects
objects, animals, and plants. The dance movements mimic Tok Naning’s action of
chopping away at shrubs, bushes, leaves, and branches as he rummages through the
forest. The dancers make diagonal downward strokes alternately with their right
and left movements, their hand representing a parang (large knife). This movement
is danced to a combination of jo’oh-style and joget-style footwork patterns

Combining Dance Movements

In the 1970s, the dancers moved counter-clockwise around the mound
throughout the song, using only one hand movement for the entire song. However,
they recently decided that this repetition was too monotonous as a spectacle for
tourists. Therefore, besides circling counter-clockwise, the female dancers have
varied their choreography to create lines. The dancers begin in a circle, which splits
up into two lines. They then move toward each other, criss-crossing to change
places with the dancer on the opposite end. The creation of lines breaks the traditional symbolic practice of circling counter-clockwise.

The two popular songs performed for tourists are Jaboi Song and Ganding Song which Julida Uju re-choreographed to include hand movements from the Pera Gunting Song and Kuwang Kuit Song. This combination of dance movements from various songs into one song, and the straight lines to vary the circle formations, are recent innovations in the dance choreography. This method again resembles the pastiche technique used in composing contemporary song texts and creating new costume patterns.

The Jaboi song utilizes the jo-oh foot patterns and the swaying of hands stretched out horizontally from the right to left. Sometimes, these are combined with the Pera Gunting Song and Kuwang Kuit Song. The Ganding Song danced during weddings and festivals uses the joget foot patterns and large hand swings from right to the left. Sometimes, they are combined with the hand movements from the Pera Gunting Song or Kuwang Kuit Song.

Resignifying the Main Jo’oh as a stage performance, it is inevitable that the Mah Meri are challenged by newer ideals and ideas to innovate their dance. Performing at a national and international level, they are compared with other cultural traditions having their own high standards of performance. Thus, in recent years, they have begun re-choreographing their dances to stimulate more excitement among the audience. They have also created a repertoire of movements for the few songs in their recent repertoire. Although the hand movements and foot patterns are associated with specific songs, the Mah Meri continue to be versatile in
accommodating their performances to the type of venue and function. For example, during ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day), each dance is performed with its specific dance patterns. This is because the ceremony lasts for half a day and the Main Jo’oh functions more as background music. Dancing begins after each spirit is propitiated, and the musicians and dancers have ascended to the Haduk Moyang (Spirit House) to receive their blessings from the spirits. As everyone else follows to the Spirit House, the Main Jo’oh is performed on the grassy open space in it. Inviting their spirits to celebrate the joyous day with them, the Main Jo’oh troupe continues dancing till noon, resting for short intervals. During this ceremony, the entire song and dance repertoire is sung and danced to. The dancing may last for a few hours and includes participation of the tourists, both local and international.

During a visit by a group of international and local students on an exchange program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in July 2009, the students asked to participate in the dance after the usual Jaboi and Ganding Song had been performed. They asked for something rancak (energetic) and exciting. The Main Jo’oh cultural troupe decided to perform Pera Gunting Song.

This ability to vary their dances in respond to venue, sponsorship and purpose, shows that the Mah Meri are aware of the surrounding socio-political situations comprising their livelihood. They play the role of masking their identity when needed, revealing only what is beneficial and emphasizing the features needed to address a variety of multicultural groups in Malaysia and international.
Song Texts

The following section discusses the contemporary song texts that assert Mah Meri identity through the manifestation of place (ecological niche) and presence (people). This section is purposely separated from the contemporary song texts discussion in Chapter 6, which express the desire for a return to communality and unity among villagers. I select fragments of verses from contemporary songs to exemplify the assertion of place and presence. Place is manifested through the naming of native and cultivated flora and fauna, and presence, through the daily activities, belief system, filial piety and kinship, *adat* (custom), and tourism activities in the village. This section expands on the notion of pastiche and decentralization of time and space discussed in Chapter 6. The composition of song texts consisting of multiple themes, and the addition of fragments of song texts from different generations are observed.

Song texts analysis is divided into genres: 1) *moyang* songs or songs about the supernatural include Jaboi, Tok Naning, and ‘Ari Moyang Song 2) animal songs—Musang, Kuwang Kuit, and Pera Gunting 3) nature and daily Activities—Sidud and Balaw. Songs discussed in Chapter 6 were the Kuwang Kuit, Pera Gunting, Musang, Sidud, Balaw and ‘Ari Moyang Song. Since this chapter also examines excerpts from the same songs, cross-references to entire song texts will be made to Chapter 6. The Jaboi, Ganding and Tok Naning songs, which were not discussed in the previous chapter, will be analyzed and its song texts shown. Among the eleven musical pieces I collected, Si Ooi and Gemah Lebat are instrumental pieces, therefore they have no texts to be examined.
Moyang Songs

Lagu Jaboi (Jaboi Song)

The Jaboi Song is a traditional song inherited through oral tradition. Jaboi is a localized, mythical human-apelike creature, which roams the forests of Peninsular Malaysia. Jaboi’s association with Kampung Sungai Bumbun manifests place in the song. The song describes place through the naming of native flora and fauna of the past, such as the nyireh leaves and tipak (ghost) crabs, as well as cultivated crops, such as sugar cane, cassava, and betel leaves grown in orchards. The description of past activities enjoyed by the Mah Meri such as roasting crabs, cassava, and seaweed by the riverbank illustrates the presence of Mah Meri in Carey Island. The Jaboi Song welcomes tourists and visitors. This song reminds the Mah Meri not to feel inferior about their culture, to remember their customs and the ways of their ancestors. The focus on their traditions reveals a village that has pride in their own customs and culture. Thus this song combines memories of the ancestors and elders with the expression of contemporary issues by the adults.

Jaboi song manifests the pastiche method (previously discussed in Chapter 6) of composition, in which fragments of poems from various generations and multiple themes decontextualized from time and space are combined into a song. The first verse is traditionally inherited from Mah Meri moyang (ancestral spirits); the second and third were composed by Maznah Unyan; and the fourth verse is from Samah Seman. A variety of themes decentered from a central subject (the mythical being, Jaboi) are fragmented and juxtaposed together. The themes represented are place (native and cultivated plants and domesticated animals), and presence—
addressing the tourists, the Main Jo’oh as a cultural heritage, and daily activities. The interweaving of multiple themes reflects postmodern features of subverted order, loss of centralization and fragmentation, a great contrast to features of modernism, where hierarchy, order, and centralized control persist. The question of taxonomy also arises for the rewritten text has very little connection to the characteristics of Moyang Jaboi.

**Lagu Jaboi (Jaboi Song)**

1st verse: traditional  
2nd and 3rd verse: Maznah Unyan  
4th verse: Samah Seman

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dinang . . .</td>
<td>Dinang ...</td>
<td>Gumud gamad, the ghost crab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gumud gamad tipak, ketam tipak</td>
<td></td>
<td>Boil cassava at the river bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Po’oh ngale bebe, tepi bebe</td>
<td></td>
<td>Welcome, visitors arrive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hai selamat tibak, he mak tibak</td>
<td></td>
<td>We perform the Main Jooh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Jo’oh gabe, hae gabe</td>
<td></td>
<td>The tall steel fence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modernised</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pagar besi serek, pagar serek</td>
<td></td>
<td>Don't let your shirt brush the miang of the sugar-cane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dek miang baju, miang be-oi</td>
<td></td>
<td>If you are want to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaluk hik serek, haga serek</td>
<td></td>
<td>This is the Jaboi Song, Moyang Jaboi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahok Lagu Jaboi, Moyang Jaboi</td>
<td></td>
<td>Boil ghost seaweed, ghost crabs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modernised</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Po’oh agar tipak, ketam tipak</td>
<td></td>
<td>Make a rack/shelf to place betel leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabe paguk camai, ka’oin camai</td>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t forget the Main Jooh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Jooh lupak, dek lupak,</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Song of our elders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahok Lagu temai, mangge temai</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Recorded and transcribed by Clare Chan, 2009)
Lagu Tok Naning (Tok Naning Song)

The Tok Naning is a good example of a traditional song that exemplifies the Mah Mah Meri cultural heritage and accentuates place. Tok Naning is a supernatural ancestral spirit specifically related to Kampung Sungai Bumbun. This song is the only song that has retained its entire song text (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., May 8, 2009). The retaining of these song texts may be due to the entertaining story and short verses about this mythical being. Tok Naning displays specific human and supernatural behavior. It is greedy, loves to collect objects, and keep them in a pouch around his stomach. One day it becomes extremely hungry, its eyes hurt, and it gets a headache when it cannot find the things it wants in its cluttered house.

Cassava is a cultivated plant and staple diet of the Mah Meri. Roasting cassava by the riverbank is a traditional recreational activity (manifesting presence) enjoyed by the Mah Meri. Unfortunately, the Mah Meri have difficulty conducting these activities today since the many rivers have dried up and they are also barred from river banks by oil-palm plantation authority.

Lagu Tok Naning (Tok Naning Song)
Lyrics: Traditional

Tok Naning, lihok bangkuk melihok
Koi pening kohop met la gohop
Mui nidei meri getik hak meri
Yok lamat sele o’oit la selei

Tok Naning collects too many things
His head aches, his eyes almost pop out
He sleeps overnight in the forest
He comes back, his stomach is hungry

Coong leng ngale naca leh ngale
Coong leng ngale naca leh ngale
Yok lamat sele o’oit la sele
Yok lamat sele o’oit la sele
(Recorded and transcribed by Clare Chan, 2009)

Roast cassava, eat cassava
Roast cassava, eat cassava
Go home late, stomach is hungry
Go home late, stomach is hungry
Lagu ‘Ari Moyang (‘Ari Moyang Song)(refer to page 271)

The ‘Ari Moyang Song is a lively joget-styled song newly composed by Zainuddin Unyan and Maznah Unyan in 2009. ‘Ari Moyang is the most important celebration for the Mah Meri today. It is a popular tourist event held one month after Chinese New Year. This date has been listed on Tourism Malaysia’s website as one of the attractive events to attend. The ‘Ari Moyang song was composed by Zainuddin in 2009 for the annual ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day) celebrations.

The ‘Ari Moyang Song is the only contemporary song that is monothematic, whose content exemplifies its title. However, a variety of ideas are embodied in the song texts. A pastiche combining Mah Meri belief system, indigenous cuisine, and cultural heritage is expressed. Place is emphasized through the naming of moyang (spiritual beings) as guardians of Mah Meri territories. In verses 3 and 5, all the guardian spirits of each sub village, namely, Moyang Gadeng of Kampung Sungai Mata, Moyang Amai of Kampung Sungai Salang, Moyang Keteg of Kampung Sungai Bumbun II, and Moyang Keramat, the guardian of Jugra Hill, are propitiated.

Presence is manifested through the activities in preparation of the ceremony. The Mah Meri gather to make coconut desserts such as sagun and koleh (verse 2), and ketupat (glutinous rice wrapped in young coconut leaves)(verse 4). Aunties and girls weave bunga moyang that depict the flora and fauna of Carey Island, such as cip (birds) and bunga bomba (bomba flowers), to decorate Haduk Moyang (Spirit

157 Kampung Sungai Bumbun is subdivided into Kampung Sungai Mata, Kampung Sungai Salang and Kampung Sungai Bumbun II (I utilized numbers to distinguish the village from its sub village)
house) two weeks preceding the celebration. Uncles and boys help to set up the altar and worship place (verse 1).

**Animal Songs**

*Lagu Musang* (Musang Song) (refer to page 260)

The Musang Song is a cheerful and lively traditional Mah Meri song. The tune resembles that of the Ganding Song and is used for weddings and dancing. Originally written about the character and behavior of the civet cat, in the contemporary era, diverse themes are combined into a potpourri of flowers, plants, animals, sea creatures, and many other things. The *dikau* and *segak* cane, and the *mahang* wood (verse 3), the *te’pes* and *melor* flower (verse 4) are native and cultivated flora that demonstrate place in Carey Island. Kuwang kuit Song is based on a story about a flying fox. This song names a variety of fauna, such as the flying fox and archerfish (verse 1), mackerel, and perch fish (verse 2). The flora of the island exemplified in the song is the *bakau* (mangrove) leaf (verse 1 and 3). Another Mah Meri tradition is demonstrated by the culture of smoking tobacco rolled in leaves.

Based on Maznah Unyan’s recollection, this song tells of a man who goes fishing. He sees the flying fox’s wings flapping like the leaves of the *bakau* (mangrove) tree blown in the wind. He notices the pulsating movement of the flying fox as it hangs upside down in trees, the beauty of its take-off, and its flight from tree to tree. As the man cruises along the river, he spots a *sumpit* (archer) fish trying to spray water at a red ant clambering onto a leaf after falling off a tree. As he leans over to steer his *pahuk* to avoid the fish, his shoulder basket (*tintung*) brushes the surface of the river water (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., April 21, 2009).
Lagu Pera Gunting (Pera Gunting Song) (refer to page 258)

The Pera Gunting Song demonstrates place through the naming of native flora such as the nyireh and bakau wood, two types of mangrove wood (verse 3) from the banks of the river, and the tanjung and hele, two types of fern shoots (verse 3) from the forest. Rattan used to make baskets is also mentioned (verse 1).

This song is about the gunting bird that makes a loud crackling sound in the evening. Ranggun Semen describes the performance of this song during her youth in the 70s.

Hold hands, let go hands, the Song of Pera Gunting, we perform again. Male and female hold hands and turn around, makes my head spin. This song is about a bird that makes “perah ... perah ... gunting ting ting” sounds. This bird likes to eat the kejel plant, which has long roots, its fruit, is deep in the ground. It is the same tapioca uprooted by Moyang Melur. We don’t see the birds now, they don’t exist anymore because there is no more forest now. (ibid., April 22, 2009)

Zainuddin Unyan rewrote the lyrics of this song. Unlike the lyrics of 1970s that describe the peacock pheasant searching for the kejel (cassava), the lyrics of this song reminisce about the life style and livelihood of the past, the activities, and the flora and fauna, such as foraging for rattan to make baskets; striking drums and metals bars; harvesting the nyireh batu wood and paku (fern) shoots; and of wading across the shallow waters near Jugra. This song reflects the pastiche method of composition and the decentralization of a central subject due to the variety of themes inherent in it.
Nature and Daily Activities

_Lagu Sidud_ (Sidud Song)(refer to page 262)

Sidud means “to spill water.” The song texts describe cultivated plants in the Mah Meri gardens, for example the _hentok bakar_ (bakar banana), _hentok mangan_ (mangan banana), _jagung_ (corn), and _ubi_ (cassava). Daily Mah Meri activities that manifest presence include making _gulai hentok_ (banana gravy/ stew), boiling cassava, and tapioca, and steaming _tenggirik_ (mackerel). The _ikan tenggirik_ (mackerel fish)(verse 5) caught and consumed by the Mah Meri exemplify the fauna near the island. In Verse 5, the setting up of a mosquito net demonstrates the ubiquity of mosquitoes on the island.

The Sidud Song also welcomes and addresses the tourists. It tells the Mah Meri not to be embarrassed or feel inferior about the Main Jo’oh. It also requests that the tourists remember them and communicate with others their existence of the Mah Meri in Malaysia. The Mah Meri hope that many others will come to visit their village through the promotion of previous tourists.

_Lagu Balaw_ (Balaw Song)(refer to page 268)

The Balaw Song demonstrate place through the naming of both native and cultivated flora and fauna. Betel leaves and cassava (verse 2), _mahang_ wood (verse 4), and _ceri_ tree (verse 5) are plants and trees found in the village and forest surroundings. The Mah Meri enjoy chewing areca nuts wrapped in betel leaves garnished with some lime paste. The _ceri_ tree is named after cherries because of its
resemblance to the fruit. Cassava is consumed as their staple diet, while the shoots from the plant are stir-fried as vegetable dishes. The ayam jinak (wildfowl) (verse 2), burung murai (magpie) (verse 3), and hornet (verse 4), are birds and insects that fill the village with sounds from their crowing, buzzing and singing. The wildfowl is slaughtered and cooked with coconut curry only during festive occasions. The magpie’s singing indicates the arrival of guests (Zainuddin Unyan, pers. comm., February 9, 2009).

This song demonstrates Mah Meri cultural values of attachment to family and friends. The Mah Meri hope for continuing friendships with the tourists. They express this in the phrase, “If we are friends, don’t part then, we are friends again when you keep in touch” (verse 1) (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., 22 March 2009). The song texts express Mah Meri sentiments of kinship and friendship that they hope outsiders will share, but they soon realize that not all outsiders share these common values. This song also acknowledges the blessings the Mah Meri have received because Carey Island has become popular as a tourist destination. They celebrate this by continuing to perform and improve on the Main Jo’oh (verse 5).

The contemporary song texts describe a domesticated village life, plants and fruits from the garden, domesticated animals, and celebratory foods. There are also remnants of descriptions of traditional flora and fauna, daily activities, and recreation. This song affirms the pastiche mode of song texts composition.
Summary

The contemporary Main Jo’oh is constructed to assert Mah Meri identity. This expression of identity is also influenced by the desire to “stage authenticity” for the tourist gaze. While constructing authenticity, the Main Jo’oh has become a pastiche of ideas. This combination congeals collective memories of ancestors and the current villagers. Fragmented themes from the past livelihood as hunter-gatherers coalesce with the current sedentary agricultural lifestyle. Contemporary musicians have further expanded the multi-themed songs observed in the late 1900s, affected by exposure to modern life. The embodiment of pastiche in the Main Jo’oh foreshadows the growing postmodern self in the Mah Meri—made up of multiple identities shaped by fragments of ideas from everywhere and elsewhere. The identity of postmodern individuals is mobile, flexible and changes in time, location and space (Slobin 1993).

The search for the authentic culminates in an “imagined old” which is actually quite new. I use the word “imagined” because the intended old and authentic are constructed from a contemporary person’s ideas or memories of the old. Therefore, the contemporary Main Jo’oh is actually a contemporary imagination of the past. This “invented tradition” (Hobsbawn 1983) may be more clearly defined as an imagination of contemporary Mah Meri about their past, supporting the term of staged authenticity describing it.

The organization and standardization of costume accessories, dance movements, masks, and props parallel the features of modern society. The need to
capture the attention of an audience with a short attention span and desire for the “spectacular,” those who seek the compact “all-in-one” shows creates a need for compressing the most exciting elements of the culture into brief performances. Thus, even as the Mah Meri try to reclaim their past and assert their traditional cultural identity, they are inevitably controlled by hegemonic forces.

As Keesing notes, the “ancestral ways of life being evoked rhetorically [or in the Main Jo’oh case, through performance] may bear little relationship to those documented historically, or recorded ethnographically, and reconstructed archaeologically—yet their symbolic power and political force are undeniable” (Keesing 1989, 19). I support Keesing’s suggestion that it does not matter whether the past being recreated or invoked is “real” or mythical. Rather, the use of these reinventions for the purpose of assisting in the retention of land rights by the Mah Meri is what that matters.

The next chapter shows how the reconstructed Main Jo’oh is used in various types of performances, such as staged weddings and mimed music dramas. Some of these performances include the intervention of government cultural officers and outsiders, while others reflect Mah Meri agency.
Chapter 8

STAGING PERFORMANCES FOR TOURISTS: COMPLYING, NEGOTIATING, OR RESISTING HEGEMONY

The photo above (Figure 7.1.) was taken during ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Spirit Day) on March 16, 2010. It was an event officiated by Y.B. Dato’ Seri Utama Dr. Rais Yatim, the head of the Ministry of Information, Communications, and Culture. Dr. Rais’ attendance recognizes the status of Mah Meri performances for the tourism industry in Malaysia. The new look of this teenage Mah Meri girl shows the influence of Western aesthetics of beauty; and a globalized make-up style learned from a cultural officer in 2009.

This chapter examines the issues of influence and power as Mah Meri interact with various hegemonies that seek to reconstruct their performances for the tourist gaze. I analyze the influences of tourist agents, cultural officers, and
masters of ceremony (MC) on various types of Mah Meri performances: 1) staged weddings outside the village 2) staged weddings within the village 3) non-staged weddings in the village 4) a mimed music drama 5) the Main Jo’oh with outsider influence 6) a music drama. A staged wedding with significant Mah Meri agency sponsored by the government and performed in Kuala Lumpur; a staged wedding performance mounted in the village, organized and mediated by a tourist agent; two non-staged weddings in different Mah Meri villages organized by the opoh are used to compare and contrast the staged weddings conducted in the village and beyond. The Mah Meri also experienced the participation and influence of an outsider in the Main Jo’oh during a staged performance outside the village. The mimed-music drama was mediated by a cultural agent for a government sponsored international festival. The last example featured Mah Meri as well as professional Malaysian musicians and dance choreographers who provided the external catalyst for Mah Meri creativity. The first two types problematise control related to issues of power, negotiation, and resistance. The third and fourth types suggest a more collaborative dynamic.

I believe that Mah Meri performances for tourists are shaped by Malaysian social, political, and economic power structures. The Mah Meri’s performances are no longer confined to interactions within their ecological niche or limited to the cultural contacts encountered in pre-Independence and colonial Malaya. The dialectics of compliance, negotiation, and resistance are constantly at play in Mah Meri interactions with the myriad forces that shape them in this age of globalization. I suggest that while Mah Meri values and customs influence the presentation of
events; they are also subjected to forms of neo-colonialism and the effects of modernity. I explore Guilbault’s suggestion on exploring “agency” in the marketing of world music.

... to examine the mediations and agency as points of entry to understanding what, at a particular time, comes into play in the ways people conceive and perceive things (mediations), and what, at the material level, put alliances into motion (agency/agents) ... developing a better understanding of the multiple and ever-changing meanings of world music. (Guilbault 1997, 41)

I argue that performances for tourists are constructed out of power struggles between the Mah Meri and a hegemony; the outcome is the space where the “tug of war” is at equilibrium.

**Externally Influenced Musical Presentations**

This discussion contributes to ongoing considerations of external influence in traditional performance. A number of researchers have studied the power-related issues of performances. Trimillos (1998) presents how Philippines values and modes of thinking influenced performances at the 1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival; Strakker (2003) posits how the Tuareg Ensemble’s performance embodied their desire to demonstrate their uniqueness rather than conform to the official Mali construction of a united nation. Stillman (1996) writes on how the Merrie Monarch Competition has affected the structure of Hawaiian hula. Moulin (2005) describes the influence of artist-director, Jean-Paul Lande, on the construction of a contemporary Tahitian presentation of the spectacle “Maui.” Lau (1998) discusses how the musical repertoire for tourists was packaged to include ethnic minority music presented as “ancient,” aiming to portray China's multi-ethnic community as
co-existing peacefully. Yang (2009) explores how the Miao, ethnic minorities of Guizhou, China, construct their identity and music to demonstrate their uniqueness in the midst of a Han hegemony. Cooley (2005) describes the music and dances of the Tatra Mountains for tourists as the combination of ideas from ethnographers and the musicians. The Kecak and Barong dances of Bali today are the result of suggestions from Walter Spies, a Russian-born German. The examples cited show the influence of larger power structures on the performing traditions of ethnic music. The three types of Mah Meri performance and the five examples examined reflect one culture’s dialectic of internal and external agency.

**Staged Wedding with Mah Meri Agency and Minimal External Intervention**

On July 12, 2009, the Malaysian Handicraft Center (Kraftangan Malaysia) organized a bridal display event, sponsored by the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture. To maximize profit, the event was extended and promoted on the “Tourism Malaysia” agenda. A slogan entitled “1Malaysia Marriage” was “splashed” across newspapers and the Internet to attract local and international tourists. Capitalizing on the latest buzz-word “1Malaysia,” staged traditional marriage ceremonies from seven cultural groups were performed—Malay (Minangkabau), Chinese, Baba Nyonya, Indian, Sabahan (Kadazan), Sarawak (Iban), and Orang Asli (Mah Meri). The Mah Meri were chosen due to their well-known, elaborate, and complicated wedding rituals.
Note: From left, Sabahan (Kadazan), Indian, Chinese, Malay (Minangkabau), Orang Asli (Mah Meri), Penjabi, Baba Nyonya and Sarawakian (Iban) staged bridal couples

Figure 7.2. 1Malaysia Marriage Manifestation (July 12, 2009). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

The Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun were enthused by the invitation to present a traditional “authentic” wedding. For the presentation, they had to recall all the minute details of the traditional Mah Meri wedding. Gathering information from the memories of the elders, the Mah Meri reconstructed a wedding for tourist consumption. Seven rituals for the wedding were performed: 1) *merisik* (enquiry), ii) *tandak* (engagement), iii) *minang* (proposal), 2) *kateik jemoi*\(^{158}\) (tooth-filing—*kateik*: cut; *jemoi*, tooth), 3) *berinai* (henna staining), 4) *perarakan* (bride procession), 5) *igap kedoh* (bride capture—*ijap*: catch; *kedoh*: female), 6) *bersanding* 

\(^{158}\) known as *mengasah gigi* in Bahasa Malaysia.
(bridal couple display), and 7) *kenduri hum*\(^{159}\) (bathing ritual). In reality, many of these rituals have been currently omitted from contemporary weddings due to cost, and a reduced attachment to *adat* (custom) and animistic beliefs. Although Mah Meri agency is dominant in this performance, some forms of colonial mimicry are also detected. The next section demonstrates issues of power, colonial mimicry, “staged authenticity,” and modernization inherent in this wedding ceremony as mediated performance.

**Subverting Hegemony**

Unlike the other cultural groups—who selected only the most interesting parts of their wedding rituals, wore rented costumes from bridal shops, and limited their performances to one hour— the Mah Meri took the maximum three hours allotted to them. They did not eliminate any part of the ceremony, even though they had some concern that the lengthy performance might bore the audience.

Before the staged wedding began, the Mah Meri smoked their musical instruments and bathed their faces and shoulders in *kemian* (incense), which served to summon their *moyang* and enable the spirits to see their descendents. While the nation-state considers the Mah Meri religion to be heathen and primitive, the Mah Meri see it as necessary to address their *moyang* for permission, protection, and blessings for a good performance. Subverting hegemony, the Mah Meri performed their initiation ceremony for an audience of local and international tourists as a cultural performance.

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\(^{159}\) known as *mandi bunga* (flower bath) in Bahasa Malaysia.
The Mah Meri began the staged wedding by acting out the *merisik* (enquiry) ritual. During this ritual, the male’s relatives visit a potential bride-to-be’s family to enquire about her status. Spontaneous and unpolished, there were many pauses, redundancies, and extended discussions, because they were often uncertain about what to do next. This *merisik* act was presented in Mah Meri language, with no concern whether the audience understood it or not, demonstrating their pride in their mother tongue and resistance toward the hegemony of the national language (Bahasa Malaysia). Each cultural group was to perform on a tiny proscenium stage. Because the Mah Meri brought many villagers to participate, they decided to expand the space beyond this stage. They made use of the hallway for the *perarak* (bridal couple procession), *silat* (martial arts) demonstration, *igap kedoh* (bride capture), and *kenduri hum* (bath ritual).

These acts of subtle resistance reflect Scott’s “weapons of the weak,” where subordinate classes respond in sporadic defiance to government policies. Hobsbawm describes this as “working the system ... to minimize their disadvantage” (Hobsbawm 1973, 3-22). Subverting the hegemony of tourism and emphasizing cultural diversity, the Mah Meri seek to sustain their cultural identity and the solidarity of their people for future generations.
Colonial Mimicry

Because the government organized this performance, the Mah Meri were inevitably subjected to instances of colonial mimicry. For example, the two Malay government officers who wrote the outline for the mock wedding presentation after interviewing Batin Sidin, the village head. During the performance, the MC translated the Malay text incorrectly into English. The Malay version described the merisik (enquiry) ritual as a ritual for parents of both parties to express the baik buruk (good and bad) traits of their child. However, the English translation was “for the parents to express the benefits of marrying their child.” Based on my own interviews, Batin Sidin says that the merisik entourage speaks in flowery Mah Meri language encoded with special meaning. Each party modestly expresses the weaknesses or shortcomings of their children rather than boast of their virtues. This was to ensure that each party would know the other’s weaknesses, relieving their parents from future blame for misleading anyone. While the Mah Meri performed the merisik ritual in Mah Meri language, they had little control over the Malay cultural officer’s interpretation of the Batin’s narratives or the English translations. The lack of concern over correct translations demonstrates a form of “colonial mimicry,” that the Mah Meri are not important enough for accuracy and it’s all right to misrepresent them. Why the Mah Meri were not permitted to explain the rituals themselves is a question; they can speak Bahasa Malaysia. Apparently they are still regarded as an uneducated group to be treated patronizingly.
**Staging Authenticity**

During Mah Meri weddings in the 1970s, music was performed only during the second night, when villagers gathered to acknowledge the bridal couple during the *bersanding* (bridal couple display) ritual. They would then dance to Main Jo’oh and Malay *joget* songs. In contemporary non-staged weddings in Mah Meri villages, a modern pop band plays music from the 1960s—*kugiran*, rock, *dangdut* or Orang Asli pop songs.

For the staged wedding performance, the Mah Meri limited musical accompaniment to only traditional Main Jo’oh songs and dances. Female dancers danced around a *busut* (mound) and male masked dancers perform to humor the audience. The bridal couple was dressed in elaborate Mah Meri costume. They wore *tajuk* (headdresses) made from cardboard, colorful beads, and paper flowers, bark tunics, and sarongs. Both held paper flowers handmade from colored paper by the *opoh*. According to Maznah Unyan, Layon Bumbung,160 a former musician of their troupe introduced the *tajuk*. Some of the villagers were not pleased with him because he liked to invent new traditions (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm., July 17, 2009). In the 1970s, Ayampillay (1974) documented a photo of a wedded couple wearing the *tajuk*, which I believe was a cultural influence from the peninsula.

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160 Kampung Sungai Kurau musicians led by Layon anak Bumbung originate from the Mata *opoh* that currently makes up the Main Jo’oh cultural troupe of Kampung Sungai Rambai. Due to expansion of family members and feud over land and cultural representations, the group moved to Kampung Sungai Kurau in the late 1900s.
Desiring to look more authentic, the Main Jo’oh musicians, female dancers, and male masked dancers wore bark cloth tunics decorated with a *simpang* (sash), *songkho* (headdress), *sanggul* (bun), *dendan* (skirt), and *tali pinggan* (belt) of woven nipa. During weddings in the 1970s, the musicians and female dancers wore *sarongs* and *baju kebaya* tops, while the male dancers wore pants and shirts adorned with simple nipa plaited weavings. Therefore, while aiming to perform an “authentic” performance, the Mah Meri are actually inventing traditions, constructing authenticity and creating an imagined nostalgia for a past performance art. The contemporary Main Jo’oh is unique to its own time. As Keesing describes this, the construction of identity—the primordial, the ancient, and mythical are ways indigenous people create the past in the present (Keesing 1989).
Another case involving authenticity actually reaffirms its subjectivity. The weakness in memory of the symbolism of the *kateik jemoi* (tooth filing) ritual triggered debate among the Mah Meri themselves over what is actually “authentic.” The *kateik jemoi* is a ritual of initiation to adulthood just as marriage is. The Mah Meri *moyang* recognize adults that have died by their filed teeth. During the mock wedding, the Batin conducted this ritual for the curious tourists who moved up close to watch.

Batin Sidin said that the tooth-filing ritual is conducted so that the Mah Meri will not “eat” their children in the future. “Eat” is a metaphor for the act of incest, a reference to a time when men were not cultured, before Moyang Kapir stole the “Book of Conduct” from Moyang Lanjut and distributed it to human beings. Unlike animals, men are controlled by cultural values, religion, and philosophy. The Malay MC translated the tooth-filing ceremony based on his understanding of its symbolism in Malay, which is similar to Batin Sidin’s explanation.

However, Julida Uju state that they she has never heard of Batin Sidin’s interpretation. The story they vaguely remember is that tooth filing assures that humans will escape having to bite the seven layers of bamboo after death. They do not know the context behind this belief (Julida Uju, pers. comm., July 12, 2009). The disagreement over the symbolism of the tooth-filing ritual reinforces the observation that oral traditions are more vulnerable to changes, overlap, and reinterpretation due to inter-cultural contacts today.
Figure 7.4.  *Kateik jemoi* (tooth filing). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

*Kenduri hum* (bathing ritual) is an act of cleansing and purification for the bridal couple. The use of specific scented flowers from the old Mah Meri ecology, believed to have purifying qualities, and cleansing lime demonstrate Mah Meri knowledge of indigenous herbs with medicinal value. The *kenduri hum* required water. In true Mah Meri fashion, three huge jars of flower-scented limewater were poured over the couple. These rituals both intrigued the tourists and Malaysian locals. In staging authenticity and transcending the “unsanitized” performance versions for tourists, the Mah Meri wet the floor with much water.

**Affirming Custom and Asserting Identity**

The staged wedding also revived many practices symbolic of Mah Meri cosmology, for example, the *igap kedoh* (bride capture) ritual. This ritual is
conducted before the groom is able to meet his bride. A series of *silat* (martial arts) matches are conducted between the family representatives of the male and female. Once the groom’s entourage breaks through the barrier, they is faced with unmarried kinswomen of his future bride, who encircle the bride with a large cloth wrapped around them. The bride is placed at the center, representing the *busut* (marriage mound) that is a symbol of how the humans populated the earth.

![Figure 7.5. *Igap Kedoh* (bride capture). (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)](image)

**A Staged Wedding in Kampung Sungai Bumbun Mediated by a Tourist Agent**

In this performance, the dynamics of hegemony, power relations, colonial mimicry, and pastiche are demonstrated in preparations for the performance. The tourist agents constitute a hegemonic force because the Mah Meri constantly complain about them, but comply with their requests for performances. Mah Meri are motivated by the opportunity to earn and travel. The agents are not necessarily a negative influence, for they bring in new markets and exposure for the Mah Meri
experience. The tourist agent’s paradigm, shaped by his interaction with the international and local tourism industry, introduces a different dimension of the tourist gaze. This section analyses a tourist agent’s production of a staged wedding in the Mah Meri village of Kampung Sungai Bumbun.

On April 2, 2009, a tourist agent organized and mediated a Mah Meri staged wedding for elementary school children from the French school of Kuala Lumpur. For the staged wedding, the tourist agent asked Lijah Uju, a Mah Meri woodcarver, to use his woodcarving shed as the bridal stage. The Mah Meri women complained about the tedious job of wedding preparations; “It takes weeks and a whole village to prepare for a wedding.” Julida Uju (per. comm. April 22, 2009) grumbled. Nevertheless, the versatile Mah Meri came up with a mini version of a bridal stage by working continuously throughout the night.

Children of French, Japanese, and Korean expatriates from ages 7 to 12 came from the school. Upon their arrival, the Mah Meri performed instrumental Main Jo’oh music to welcome them. The children then surrounded the woodcarving shed, snapping photos with their digital cameras. The tourist agent explained the seven complicated rituals in Mah Meri weddings, but he said he would only highlight some. The following shows many instances of colonial mimicry by the tourist agent.

The first ritual was a traditional hand-held puzzle the groom had to solve to test his intelligence before he could marry the girl. This game of wooden blocks and strings, known as the tali jodoh or buai tetap, is a traditional Mah Meri game sold commercially today. The object of the puzzle is to bring together the separated
pieces (representing husband and wife) on the same string to gauge the probability of one finding a life partner.

When questioned about which part of the ritual this belonged to, Julida Uju told me, “tak adalah, tu dia yang cipta punya” (No, he came up with it himself). Although this game relates to marriage, it is not one of the marriage rituals. The tourist agent merely incorporated it himself for entertainment.

Next, the tourist agent dressed a French boy and girl in Mah Meri traditional wedding attire of a tunic made from bark cloth and leaf-woven decorations. The tourist children laughed as the child-couple was seated on the plamin (bridal stage). Then, the tourist agent asked Gali Adam, another woodcarver, to mimic the batin in performing the purification ritual. A leaf whisk (leaves tied to a short stick) was dipped into tepung tawar (tepung: flour; tawar: cool or tasteless) and brushed over the children’s foreheads, chins, palms, and the backs of their hands. In real weddings, the batin cups the smoke from the kemian with his hands and presses it onto the couples’ faces, shoulders and legs, allowing the moyang to identify the couple getting married. This censing and laying-on of hands is called ukup (anoint) (Nowak 1987, 101; Skeat and Blagden 1906, 76).
Next was the guest or relative’s acknowledgment of the couple’s marriage. Gali Adam, a Mah Meri musician representing a guest, held out two bowls of rice with three candles stuck into each of the bowls. He swung it around using stylized *silat* (Malay martial arts) movements. Only men performed this act during the *bersanding* (bridal couple display) ceremony. The children giggled at the martial art mimicry accompanied by the Mah Meri wedding tune played by Zainuddin Unyan on the *jule* to the accompaniment of the Main Jo’oh ensemble. He says he vaguely remembers the tune his late father, Unyan Awas played, but I realized he was actually playing the Si Ooi song instead of the “vaguely remembered song.” Nowak mentions a henna-song during this ritual:
Picking up the rhythm of the *laguk yinai* (henna song), the musicians are playing, the shaman begins dancing. The dance, though improvised, resembles Malay *silat* (Malaysian martial arts) style. With the candles in his hands, the shaman dances, his hands moving under and above each other, like a juggler. (Nowak 1987, 103)

Next, the tourist agent explained the *igap kedoh* (bride capture) ritual, saying that if the groom changed his mind about marrying the bride, he could purposely choose the wrong girl in the bridal capture circle at the last minute. However, when I translated his explanations, Julida Uju laughed and said the bride’s kinswomen inside the circle usually help direct the groom’s hand to the bride’s hand so that they find each other in the circle. The tourist agent’s interpretation was to elicit more interest.

For the wedding finale, Gali Adam carried a miniature carving of a *pahuk* (boat) and led the French children into a “Culture Garden”161 fenced with leaves from the nipa plant behind the bridal stage for a further view of Mah Meri culture. This boat has no connection with Mah Meri weddings. It was formerly used in healing ceremonies. Woodcarvings of figurines used as gift exchanges for the souls of the sick were placed into the boat and launched out to sea. In the garden, there were rough woodcarvings displaying Mah Meri traditional items: masks, boats, baskets, blowpipe games, etc. Previously sacred symbols, they are now displayed to enrich the knowledge of the inquisitive outsiders.

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161 I created this term to reference the mini recreational park built by Lijah Uju based on the tourist agent’s instructions, behind Che Yah’s (his mother’s) house. I thought this was really creative and postmodern.
When the children entered the “Culture Garden” to view the items, the space separating the performers and children was broken. The children began asking the masked dancer many questions, such as, “What is in your huge belly?” (Tok Naning has a huge belly where he keeps his collections). Dissatisfied with his mumblings, they started hitting his stomach. As he ran, they chased him. The whole aura of mystery behind the masked dancer deteriorated into a game of “catch me if you can.”

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162 Tok Naning loves to collect things and keeps them in a pouch around his stomach. This accounts for its huge belly.
Based on his experience in the international tourist scene, the tourist agent tried to create a more spectacular but compact version of the Mah Meri wedding. He abstracted interesting aspects of the culture and combined them to create his own cultural representation. Although this may appear to be neo-colonialism, I argue that the Mah Meri are not totally disempowered in these situations, but are exposed to an outsider's perception of the tourist world. In the future, they have the power to choose to enrich their knowledge or eliminate the agent's ideas.

In the tourism world, many representations of authentic performances such as the kecak (Monkey Dance) or barong of Bali, Gorale tourism in Poland (Cooley 2005), and Maasai performances in Nairobi (Bruner 2005) are products of tourist agents, ethnographers, and the people themselves. Indeed, indigenous peoples do not live in a vacuum today; they constantly interact with various powers because of
their involvement in tourist activities. In my opinion, this pastiche that presents a “gloss” of Mah Meri culture was an intriguing idea, but can be perceived as a “bastardization” of the sacredness of Mah Meri cultural symbols.

Non-Staged Contemporary Mah Meri weddings (2007 and 2009)

Two different non-staged wedding rituals in two different villages of Carey Island provide and reflect greater Mah Meri agency. The following two sections describe the choices for choreographing their weddings available to young Mah Meri couples. The choices depend on the importance each family places on adat (custom) and the sanctity of the marriage act in a period during which moral values are vulnerable to contemporary local and global influences.

Modern Wedding at Kampung Sungai Rambai

On March 14, 2009, a young Mah Meri couple married in Kampung Sungai Rambai, Carey Island. The bride, dressed in a resplendent Western wedding gown, and the bridegroom, wearing suit sat on chairs on the plamin (bridal stage) instead of traditionally sitting on the floor. They cut the cake and fed it to their in-laws with a spoon. The cake cutting is a recent addition, borrowed from Western weddings.

Gendol Kadir, an elderly jule player from a Mah Meri village, Kampung Tanjong Sepat, Selangor on the west coast of the peninsula, was invited. His relatives are also musicians in Kampung Sungai Judah, Carey Island. These musicians met at

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163 One of Gendol’s relative in Kampung Sungai Judah was the late Lihok Kadir, a popular jule player, who had recently passed away. Kamet Kadir and Due Kadir, Lihok’s relatives, are learning to play the jule now.
Kampung Sungai Rambai for the couple’s wedding, during which they performed the Ganding Song. The Kampung Sungai Judah version of the Ganding Song, which accompanied the cake-cutting ceremony, was slightly different from that of Kampung Sungai Bumbun. Destinasi, a Temuan (Orang Asli subgroup) modern band, waiting patiently, and then began to accompany the traditional musicians. The bass guitar plucked chords, while the drummer provided rhythmic accompaniment.

After this, the band played “Besame Mucho,” while the perarak (bridal procession) entered the house. Then, all generations scurried into the dance area as the band began playing Malay songs from the 60s, kugiran and dangdut, and Orang Asli pop songs, such as “Joget Baju Kurung” (Baju Kurung joget), “Joget Kapal Terbang” (Airplane joget), and “Panas-panas.” Vendors sold food and drinks outside the balai. Young male teenagers arrived on motorbikes. A few elderly drunk Mah Meri men danced clumsily on the floor, and young children and teenagers did the joget together with their gomok (aunts) and friends. Females tended to dance with females and males with males, a practice documented by Nowak (1987) in the 80s.

**Traditional Wedding at Kampung Sungai Bumbun**

A second non-staged wedding reflects another reconstruction of traditional practice initiated by the Mah Meri themselves. The groom was the grandson of the late Unyan Awas, part of the Mata village opoh. Through the merisik (enquiry) ritual, the groom, Ghazali Uju, in his 30s, was introduced to his bride, Sani Manja, in her 20s, from a Mah Meri village in Kampung Pulau Lumut, Selangor. After a few meetings, Ghazali agreed to marry Sani. The couple chose a more traditional
wedding. Unlike the elaborate *tajuk* (headdress) worn for tourist performances, flowers woven from nipa were placed on the bride’s head. Instead of the tunic of bark cloth worn for tourist performances, the bride wore a pink *baju kebaya* (traditional Malay female attire) and white transparent *selendang* (shawl) embellished with a simple *simpang* (sash), *bunga jering* (jering flower), *tali pinggang* (belt), and *dendan* (skirt), while the groom wore a *baju melayu* (traditional Malay male shirt), pants, and sarong, and a *songkho* (headgear) made from nipa leaves.

The traditional music ensemble played Main Jo’oh songs as background music for the wedding. Of the seven wedding rituals, the couple retained six: the *merisik* (enquiry), *minang* (proposal), *bersanding* (bridal display), *kateik jemoi* (tooth filing), *kenduri hum* (bathing ritual), and *nyampak* rituals. The musicians played the Jaboi Song to accompany the couple’s procession to the bridal stage for the *bersanding* (bridal display) ritual. Batin Sidin conducted the marriage rituals with the *ukup* ritual of bathing his hands in *kemian* (incense) and pressing it onto the couple’s heads, chins, shoulders and legs. He also performed some *silat* (Malay martial arts) movements with the bowls of rice with three candles in each. The other male visitors often acknowledge the newly wed couple with the same act.

Villagers and guests also acknowledged the couple as the male guests entertained the villagers with personalized *silat* movements. While the *igap kedoh* ritual (bride capture) was omitted, the *nyampak* was kept, a ritual considered essential to a couple’s marriage education. An elderly woman spoke about proper married behavior while the couple fed each other rice and areca nut wrapped in
betel leaf, symbolizing that they must now learn to share equally with each other. During the bersanding ceremony, the couple was led to the garden where they were each provided with a sarong for the kenduri hum ritual. Three jars of water was splashed over the couple as an act of purification.

After this, the villagers enjoyed lunch to the background of Malay music from a CD player, while the Main Jo'oh ensemble rested. The opoh (extended family) had come together cooking food for several villages in big cauldrons. Later, the children and teenagers adjourned to Gendoi Samah Seman’s house, where a karaoke machine played Malay songs such as “Penawar Rindu.”

**Mah Meri Mimed-Music Drama at the Rainforest World Music Festival**

**Mediated by a Cultural Officer**

Unlike the first staged wedding that exemplifies Mah Meri agency; the second, conducted by a cultural officer; and the two other contemporary weddings arranged by the opoh, this section describes a performance resulting from compliance, negotiation, and resistance between the Mah Meri and a cultural officer assigned by the state. The final outcome is the result of negotiations among various powers presenting Mah Meri traditions and customs. Here, I use Jameson’s pastiche concept to describe performances during contemporary festivals.

On July 15, 2007, the Mah Meri performed a choreographed a “mimed music drama,” accompanied by short narratives for this international festival. A cultural
officer selected by the "Selangor State Tourism Action Council"\[^{164}\] decided that the Mah Meri tradition of dancing around a *busut* was not spectacular enough and could not hold the attention of an international audience for the forty-five minute timed performance. His choreography of this performance was aimed to provide a “gloss” of Mah Meri cultural traditions, highlighting the most interesting aspects. Compressed into the performance were three Mah Meri rituals: the initiation ceremony, wedding and healing rituals.

**Subverting Hegemony**

The cultural officer arranged for the Mah Meri to perform an initiation ritual for the audience, although this ritual was not encouraged in Malaysia because of its association with animistic spirits.\[^{165}\] He insisted that it deserved recognition as part of the Mah Meri belief system, and that it was informative and not offensive. However, he recommended shortening it to two to three minutes. After the performance, Batin Sidin confessed to me that the initiation was not just an act, but was real. He actually conducted the ritual, which is why it took him seven minutes and forty seconds, during which the audience watched in silent discomfort.\[^{166}\] He said that if permission had not been sought from the local spirit, the Princess of Santubong might be enraged. He had to contact the Mah Meri guardian spirit, Moyang Gadeng, to initiate this process. Clearly, the Mah Meri did not adhere to all the plans made by the cultural officer, but instead they used the moment of the performance to assert their own indigenous ideas of presenting the ritual.

\[^{164}\] *Majlis Tindakan Pelancongan Selangor*

\[^{165}\] For example, the *wayang kulit* of Kelantan.

\[^{166}\] After five minutes, someone broke the silence with an eerie scream.
Colonial Mimicry

The most obvious example of colonial mimicry was the narrative controlled by the cultural officer and the MC. Both embellished the storyline and atmosphere to excite the audience. The cultural officer modified the Mah Meri myth of Moyang Lanjut, cleverly combining the three rituals mentioned in Moyang Lanjut’s story. Titled the “Legend of Moyang Lanjut,” he announced that the story was an ancient Mah Meri myth and associated it with the tragic story of “Romeo and Juliet.” This was inaccurate, for in this myth, the heroine, Moyang Lanjut, accidentally drinks poison and dies, while the male character survives. In “Romeo and Juliet,” both lovers die tragically. The cultural officer managed to persuade the reluctant Mah Meri to perform this story, but the performance was not left unchallenged.

There are two versions of this myth. I believe the more indigenous version is that of Moyang Lanjut, the female moyang who guards the doors to Pulau Buah (Fruit Island), the Mah Meri’s notion of “heaven.” Moyang Lanjut is portrayed as an old lady stirring a belanga (cauldron) boiling with limestone liquid. Sinners would fall into the boiling cauldron and suffer in pain for their misdeeds on earth (Che Yah, pers. comm., July 10, 2007; Nowak 1987, 174). The second version is the myth of a husband and wife looking for crabs in the swamps on Carey Island. When the husband drowned, the wife wept and mourned his death. She later died and became
the spirit of Moyang Lanjut. It is said that she fed her dead husband with milk from her breast, which flowed to the bottom of the swamp where his remains lie.167

The cultural officer presented the Moyang Lanjut myth as the story of a "princess" who fell in love with a commoner from another village. The "princess" wanted to marry him, but the people from her tribe did not like him and feared he would become their "king" later. They therefore decided to poison him but unfortunately the "princess" drank the poison by mistake and died. Below is the Cultural Officer’s narration:

This is the first time we are going to tell a story about a "princess," who wanted to marry a person from another tribe. Similar to Romeo and Juliet, which you are quite familiar with, the whole village opposed the marriage for fear that the stranger would become king. (Transcribed recording, Clare Chan, July 2009)

The use of the words "princess" and "king" was an inaccurate representation of the Mah Meri community. They do not have such a system of hierarchy and are, for the most part, an egalitarian society. Although they have a simple system of organizing leadership, the village decisions are normally based on majority consensus.

The second example of colonial mimicry was during the wedding performance. According to Mah Meri custom, the beautifully dressed bride stands in the center of a circle made by her single friends; a golden cloth covering all. The bridegroom has the task of finding the bride among all those in the circle. Similar to

167 I jotted down the information about this myth exhibited on the woodcarving of Moyang Lanjut exhibited in the Kuala Lumpur Orang Asli Museum on June 24, 2007. Since the late Anthony Ratos sold this woodcarving to the museum, I presume he provided this story.
the *igap kedoh* (bride capture) ritual presented to the French children described above, this same cultural officer said that if the *moyang* approve of this marriage, the groom would be able to select the correct bride. If he chooses the wrong girl, he is allowed to select any maiden in the circle of unmarried women for his wife. The cultural officer twisted the story to increase the audience attention.

This is a story about where a stranger will have to find his bride. And she is hidden among many girls. This ritual is for anyone who wishes to marry. An Orang Asli from this tribe will have the choice now and if he for some reason does not want to marry her, he may choose another girl under the cloth. (ibid.).

During the finale, the performers threw *bunga moyang* (spirit flowers) as appreciation gifts to the visitors. The MC took over the microphone and described the flowers as *origami* (a word of Japanese origin), announcing to the audience that the flowers were a symbol of “good luck, health, and prosperity.” This is a typical phrase used by the Chinese to their relatives or friends during Chinese New Year.

Ladies and gentlemen, to end the ritual, we will call upon a Mah Meri cleansing ritual. It will be done with some *origami* powers. Ladies and gentlemen, please take one as a symbol of good luck, health and prosperity. May the spirits be with you! (audience screaming). The flowers, once again, are a symbol of good luck, health and prosperity. Please take one. (ibid.)

Since Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country, I assumed the MC, a Chinese familiar with this phrase, used it as an impromptu statement to describe his interpretation of the flower distribution for a Mah Meri ritual. The Mah Meri women told me later that the flowers were just a token of appreciation and love from the Mah Meri to visitors who attend weddings in the village.

The *bunga moyang* thrown to the audience were formerly important to healing ceremonies, as the ability for the spirits to recognize humans depends on
these flowers used as markers of identification for the *moyang* during healing ceremonies. Once the spirits see the leaves, they know that they have entered the human world. (Karim 1981, 168-169). The MC, however, provided his own interpretation of the *bunga moyang*. “May the spirits be with you,” he said melodiously. Karim states

These leaves act as landmarks for the descending spirits to find their way to the world. They are symbolically important, for the success of the seance party depends on whether these spirits find their way down to the house where the séance is held. (ibid., 168)

Ironically the MC just described the true function of the flowers in Mah Meri healing ceremonies when he jokingly invited the spirits to be with the audience. This naive mocking may rouse the annoyance of the spirits. Although the Main Jo’oh invites plant and animal spirits to join them in celebration, the ritual does not invite them to stay. And they have been known to refuse to leave. The finale ended with the audience screaming and trying to catch the *bunga moyang* thrown to them.

**Pastiche**

After the bride capture scene, the musicians chose to play an instrumental version of the Tok Naning Song, which has no customary link to the bride capture or wedding and was merely used to accompany the wedding ritual. In the wedding scene, music and songs to accompany the rituals were fit in as transitions or accompaniment for the ritual. The Jaboi Song was used as a transition from the

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168 Batin Sidin told me that his brother-in-law who was playing the role of a masked dancer, experienced the spirit of the mask he was wearing in his body for a few days before it decided to leave.
initiation to the bride capture scene. The Ganding Song usually played for weddings, accompanied the finale where the musicians threw bunga moyang at the audience. The Mah Meri decided on this insertion of songs, demonstrating their agency and spontaneity in adapting to the needs of the staged performance.

The cultural officer used the Moyang Lanjut story to arouse the emotions associated with Romeo and Juliet, another tragedy. The Mah Meri had less controlled in the narrative to their performance, which was presented in English. The selected rituals suggested by the Cultural Officer due to their uniqueness, were the initiation, bride capture, wedding, and healing scene. This combining of music, ritual, and acting demonstrates Jameson's pastiche concept where events are combined in a non-chronological order or unrelated to traditional function.

What occurred during this festival was an interactive negotiation of power to shape the delivery and reception of the performance. The two main agents were the cultural officer and the Mah Meri. The MC inserted an unplanned interruption in the performance, adding to the distortion of the truth displayed about the Mah Meri culture. I thought the cultural officer's combination of three rituals as a concise way of introducing Mah Meri culture was clever; however it could have been better if it had been arranged with more care and indigenous input. He helped bring the Mah Meri to an international festival, for it was through his "lobbying" and government connections that they participated. This type of networking with authorities is vitally important to community performing groups trying to bring their arts and culture to a larger audience.
However, the Mah Meri, were not passive enactors of an externally-shaped presentation. In the final performance, they had discussed among themselves how to go about the act and actually took the lead in determining how their culture and traditions would be presented. They selected the songs and dance movements for the performance, and instinctively performed all the rituals. The only aspect they could not control was the cultural officer and the MC’s narration in English. Most of the Mah Meri cannot speak English fluently, although some of the children involved in the performance were able to converse more easily with the local and international audience.

To understand the complex negotiation of power in the performance, I refer to Foucault’s theory of power and knowledge and his idea regarding the “truth” in this example. His idea of truth as subjective and variable by those in power is apparent here. Those in power or those who hold knowledge can manipulate the truth of the performance. While the cultural officers appear to be in power, the Mah Meri hold the knowledge of the performance. Therefore, the Mah Meri have an advantage in this area. They can manipulate the performance to their wishes. The truth of Mah Meri culture is staged through negotiations between the Mah Meri and Cultural Officer. This is, indeed, exactly what we see in commercialized tourist productions that may not present the realities of indigenous communities. The “truth” in these commercial programs is highly susceptible to multiple forces that encroach upon it, as well as the agency of the people involved in articulating it. What we take as knowledge and the concepts through which we understand ourselves—reason, normality and sexuality – are instead contingent, mutable, and ahistorical
“Truth” is the construct of political and economic forces that command the majority of the power within the societal web (Foucault 1980). There is no truly universal truth at all; therefore, the intellectual cannot convey universal truth. Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. In similar ways, the presentation of Mah Meri culture as “truth” is the result of an accumulation of external and internal forces.

**Main Jo’oh Performance with Outsider Participation**

On July 12, 2009, the National Dance Festival Competition (Festival Tari Malaysia) invited the Mah Meri to perform for the interim entertainment sections, as representative of grassroots troupes. The government officer developed a positive relationship with the Main Jo’oh troupe as their facilitator. He taught them the techniques of “stage make-up,” and dotted an improvised “Marilyn Monroe mole” above or near the women’s lips. Enthusiastic about the Main Jo’oh, he asked to play one of the masked characters—the female Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang, the spirit Princess of Ledang Hill. With their permission, he added lipstick, and false red glittery eyelashes to the female mask. He also plucked fresh red hibiscus and placed it on the mask’s ears. Although the Mah Meri enjoyed his company, Julida Uju reminded him not to be too asyik (into it) when dancing, for the spirit he played might possess him.
Figure 7.10. The “Marilyn Monroe mole.” (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)

Figure 7.11. Mah Meri with their own make-up styles. (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
This outsider’s vain, feminine, and humorous impersonation of the female ancestral spirit triggered roars of laughter and applause from the local audience. He blew kisses, slightly lifted his skirt, sat cross-legged at the edge of stage, and flirted with the other masked dancers. He responded to the revolving video camera by posing “bashfully” in front of it. The two other male masked dancers wearing Moyang Pongkol and Moyang Tok Naning masks were motivated to interact with the playful actions of this outsider. The Mah Meri did not see this as a bastardization of their culture, but as a positive innovation to the Main Jo’oh. The masked dancer’s role has always been to entertain the audience. Rosiah Kengkeng says, “In the old days, the masked dancers were very good making the villagers laugh with their mischievous and naughty actions” (Rosiah Kengkeng, pers. comm., March 7, 2009). The masked dancer’s role continues, but changes because dancers are interacting with a different audience and environment. The outsider’s performance provided the Mah Meri masked dancers with new and creative ways to perform their roles.
The audience also commented, “the female dancers can’t be Orang Asli, they are too beautiful.” Somehow, the Mah Meri’s staged authenticity moved them into the professional globalized aesthetic of beauty. The audience expected them to look unrefined and coarse. This is an example of the Mah Meri being confronted with new ideas introduced by other Malaysians. During this year’s ‘Ari Moyang (March 16 2010), Achik, the outsider assisted the Mah Meri with their make-up (Figure 7.1) and decorations again. He added false eyelashes and heavy stage make up, and some chrysanthemum flowers to the girls’ headdresses (Figure 7.14). Although the make up made the Mah Meri look more beautiful in a modern sense, it also results in the

Note: Masked dancers, Faizal (Moyang Tok Naning), Achik, cultural officer (Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang, and Jali (Moyang Pongkol)

Figure 7.13. Mah Meri masked dancers with an outsider participant (photo by Clare Chan, 2009)
homogenization of the aesthetics of beauty, one spread across the globe by huge cosmetic conglomerates such as Estee Lauder, Revlon, and Elizabeth Arden.

Figure 7.14. The Mah Meri women dancing the Main Jo'oh during ‘Ari Moyang on the 16th March 2010 (Reuters © 2010 Reuters Limited)

Such interactions parallel tourism performances such as those of the Gorale for tourism in Poland (Cooley 2004), or the Kecak of Bali (Johnson 2002), the Maasai of Nairobi (Bruner 2005), and Tahitian narrative and dance (Moulin 2005), where performance is as a product of the interaction among event advisors, tourist agents, cultural officers, MCs and the people themselves. Tourism performances provide a place for Mah Meri ethnicity in a changing world, and they are what Arjun Appadurai calls, “cultural performances that express the mobilization of group identities.” (Appadurai 1996, 13) This event affirms Cohen’s notion of “tourism as play” and Rosaldo’s as “sites of creative cultural production” (Rosaldo 1989, 13).

Although some may see these interventions as disempowerment or condescension for the Mah Meri, I argue that in this century, it is inevitable that the
Mah Meri have to negotiate encounters with various powers. They can choose to subvert, merge, or adapt their performances, and their choices merit future research. Dynamics of change and continuity persist each time the Mah Meri perform in various venues, respond to different audiences, and interact with an increasingly wider globalized audience.

In the photos from ‘Ari Moyang (Ancestral Day) in March 16, 2010, I observed that the Mah Meri used the “Marilyn Monroe mole” and the stage make-up they had learned from the government officer (Figure 7.1). Following Achik’s lead, the Mah Meri added fresh flowers to their headdresses this time. The aesthetic of beauty for the Mah Meri, once appreciated by tourists for its rougher, coarse, and darker skin and their own make-up aesthetic, had been replaced with a foreign make-up style. The Mah Meri women, young and old, continued shaping their eyebrows and straightening their hair because they did not like their curly black hair.

“The Legend of Moyang Lanjut” Choreographed by Famous Artists

The Mah Meri experienced the leadership of Malaysia’s famous artists during a collaborative performance organized by Rashid Esa, a Mah Meri enthusiast, and sponsored by DiGi, a large telecommunication company in Malaysia.

The stage lights are dimmed. A silhouette of a large boat emerges from the misty shadows, then the real thing appears on stage. Bathed in a hazy smoke of red, dancers make their way forward, moving slowly to haunting music. A shaman invokes the blessings of the spirits on this new land the ancestors

169 Reuters photos.
have discovered. One by one they come, their graceful movements transporting you to a land in distant memory. The audience is completely mesmerized. Some of them – Mah Meri grandmas clutching grandchildren to their bosoms – are standing up to have a better view. Never before have they seen anything like this on their island. (*Berita Harian, March 27, 2006*)

The scene describes the large boat that brought the first Mah Meri to Carey Island. Based on Mah Meri oral tradition, they arrived on a ship that landed on Carey Island after a huge storm, a ship that solidified into Jugra Hill, located across from Carey Island on the peninsula. Well-known artists from Kuala Lumpur choreographed the performance, titled “Meriah” (Joyous Celebration) for the Mah Meri children. *Meriah* is actually an “exploration, reconstruction and a celebration of dreamtime images inspired by the myths of origin of the Mah Meri. It is a sensorial feast of sound, light and movement,” explained Ramli Ibrahim, a famous Bharatanatyam dancer in Malaysia (*Berita Harian, March 27, 2006*). With the help of Guna Sivarajah from Sutra Dance Theatre, and Valery Ross, a composer, musician and director of the ICOM (International College of Music), Ramli Ibrahim choreographed and coordinated “Meriah” based on the Legend of Moyang Lanjut, by embellishing her story with music, dance and drama.¹⁷⁰

“Meriah” is part of a project sponsored by DiGi Telecommunications Sdn. Bhd. In 2006, DiGi, a mobile telecommunications network, awarded five people in Malaysia for their efforts toward preserving and sustaining cultural heritage. As part of their cultural outreach and social responsibility program, DiGi selected five Malaysians for DiGi’s “Amazing Malaysians Award.” They were Eddin Khoo, Bishan

¹⁷⁰ Unfortunately I have no access to the video recording of this show, therefore cannot analyze it.
Singh, Janet Pillai, Rashid Esa and Laurence Loh. 171 Rashid Esa was awarded for taking the initiative to “assist the Mah Meri community in marketing their woodcarvings and weavings, and carrying out research on cultivating and maintaining the nyireh batu trees, the source for the woodcarvings” (Berita Harian, March 27, 2006).

After winning the “Woodcraft Warrior Award” sponsored by DiGi, Rashid Esa was also sponsored to produce a program for Mah Meri children. He called for the assistance of Ramli Ibrahim and Valery Ross to help in dance choreography and music composition, respectively. For this, the Mah Meri villagers and children were exposed to long hours of practice, and traditional Western educational style. Unlike the system of oral transmission, where music and dance are embedded in the heart and soul through oral traditions of spontaneity, improvisation, and flexibility, this performance exposed Mah Meri children to globalized systems of education. Besides the choreography of musical theatre, the children were provided crayons, charcoal, watercolors, poster colors, acrylics, silkscreen, clay, and batik. Their art facilitator, Norma Mohd, was amazed at the children’s creativity.

we wanted to give their art a Carey Island identity, so we asked them about animals they encountered on the island ... they drew frogs, snakes and chickens, but I have to say, some drew horses ... they must have relocated many times. There is something very pure about their work, you can’t find it in kids in the city. If you ask city kids to draw something from their lives, they

171 Bishan Singh was awarded for his efforts in preserving the naturalness of Lake Chini, Pahang; Janet Pillai used theatre and dance with children to recreate the cultural heritage of Penang, specifically Mutia Island, historically prominent with traders from the Far East; Eddin Khoo, studied the Shadow Puppet of Kelantan under the late Dalang Hamzah Abdullah; Laurence Loh, made efforts to keep alive the history of Lunas, Kedah. Jafar, Fadzlena. DiGi bantu pulihara warisan kebudayaan. Berita Harian, March 27, 2006.
will draw Ultraman. These kids come out with frogs, musang (civet cat . . . when they draw a tree, it is the oil palm. (NST, October 23, 2006)

Ironically, these comments reflect how naive modern societies are about the Mah Meri. They seem amazed at natural abilities taken for granted by the Mah Meri themselves. In another case, famous musicians were invited to teach the Mah Meri how to play percussion. Many of the Main Jo’oh troupe member’s children innately respond to the Main Jo’oh songs and rhythm, which automatically transfer to their kinetic movements. I observed them seeking opportunities to play the tawak and tungtung when the elders were exhausted. Their rhythm was perfectly accurate.

On one hand, huge conglomerates like DiGi are praised for their generosity; on another, one questions the sincerity of these one-time projects. Is it really only to promote the image of DiGi as a rich enterprise that reaches out to the “poorer communities, reducing its image as a giant business organization? There are many organizations that reach out to the village in different ways. Some prefer to exploit the creativity of the villagers based on their own aesthetics, resources and for their own economic benefit. Encountering the effects of contemporary organizations and global homogeneity, will the Mah Meri future generations continue to remain unique and different in the “time-space compression” (Harvey 1990, 351) we face today?
Summary

The different types of staged wedding show variation in Mah Meri agency. The first staged wedding reveals mostly Mah Meri agency, with little intervention from outsiders. It shows that there is space for Mah Meri values and tradition or agency, especially for government organizations seeking the “authentic.” These representations integrate memories of the traditional as the Mah Meri reinvent them in contemporary ways. They are also platforms for cultural rejuvenation that optimize Mah Meri creativity, thrusting their aesthetics into the limelight. However, these reinventions are also restrained by the village’s musical troupe goals of cultural preservation and assertion of ethnic identity.

The second staged wedding, mimed musical, and national dance festival manifest forms of colonial mimicry. Yet, viewed in a positive light, this mimicry inspired Mah Meri with ideas of how they could recreate their performances through the lens of an outsider exposed to the tourism industry. Whether the Mah Meri reproduce these ideas is worth future research.

The examples of non-staged weddings for young Mah Meri couples show us that tradition and modernity co-exist. The entry into modernity, development, and globalization contribute to the dynamics of Mah Meri culture by integrating the new and old. These weddings depend on the choices made by the couple. The level of creativity depends on the couple’s exposure and family background, as well as the desire to maintain old traditions. Weddings are practical, flexible, eclectic, and rely on affordability. The choice of which rituals to retain depends on what the Mah Meri
feel is important to the propagation of their identity, or perhaps what they consider to be “proper” or meaningful.

Unlike the days of late Unyan Awas, who firmly rejected the performance of the Legend of Moyang Lanjut as “mimed musical drama” during the Rainforest World Music Festival of 2007, Mah Meri of the present exhibit some degree of compliance to create a more “spectacular” representation of their culture. However, this compliance is not left unchallenged, even if by tiny acts of resistance. This approach results in a final product packaged for the “tourist gaze.”

The last example brings into the village all forms of global technology—digitalized western music, training sessions, and rehearsals, backdrops, smoke machines, and theatrical props. The glamour of working with well-known artists, having sponsorships for costumes, and the opportunity to interact with children from other schools draw the Mah Meri closer to other Malaysian citizens.

Thus, there are various levels of “authenticity” represented by different agencies and power structures. Based on habitus, different tourists witnessing different staged weddings come away with what they consider to be an authentic version of Mah Meri weddings. The signs signified onstage to the audiences vary according to the power relations inherent in their preparations for different events.

Although ideas for performances stimulate Mah Meri responses, the commoditization of tourism embodies Marx’s “commodity fetishism,” one that moves the power from the Mah Meri to capitalistic agencies. The Mah Meri do not profit much from this exploitation and have little control over their audiences and the fruit of their labor (Marx 1983). The manner in which Mah Meri weddings and
the Main Jo’oh were performed for various audiences reaffirms the postmodern theories of semiotics postulated by Saussure, Peirce and Baudrillard, as well as subjectivities of authenticity posited by Rojek and Urry (1990), Cohen (1988) and Bruner (2005).

The final chapter summarizes the general themes in this dissertation and my positionality among the Mah Meri, and suggests areas for further research on the indigenous minorities of Malaysia.
Chapter 9

CONCLUSION: A PUSH FORWARD AND A PULL BACKWARD

The reconstruction of music is ongoing in Mah Meri society, and the Main Jo’oh has been continually adapted. My study shows that changes consist of a reimagination of the past blended with contemporary creation motivated by the desire to assert identity, stage authenticity, and revive traditional values. As Andaya states, “there is therefore not a question of ‘losing’ their traditions, but in following their traditions in the period of adaptation and reaching of a new ‘tradition’ . . . it is tradition as it has always been.” (Andaya, pers. comm. October 20, 2010). The next section summarizes the important findings of this dissertation.

Summary of findings

Some of the important findings in my dissertation include how Mah Meri musical style was shaped by the cultural diversity encountered during their travels and migrations in the Malay peninsula. Musical analysis shows that Mah Meri music reflects their Austroasiatic ancestry, yet it also has absorbed elements of the cultural values of diverse other groups living on the southern coastal plains of the peninsula. Historical examination of Mah Meri migration, interaction, and livelihood suggests the origins of these influences. For example, the indigeneity of their music lies in the driving rhythmic patterns of the tungtung (bamboo stamping tubes), the structural tones originating from three to four note chants, damped and undamped timbres of the banjeng (bamboo zither), and the singers’ nasal and coarse singing style. The
interlocking rhythm patterns of the *tambo* and the colotomic units punctuated by the *tawak* (gong) reflect Malay traditions; and the three-against-two melodic rhythms suggest Portuguese influences. These multiple influences from diverse cultural contacts are molded into a unique musical style embodying the ethos of Mah Meri culture.

Another fundamental issue in this dissertation is how indigenous music is recontextualized from ritual enactment to stage spectacle in a time of globalization. Mah Meri entry into this space brings up questions of the meaning of music and performance for a people increasingly surrounded by global culture and values. As Mah Meri belief systems evolved due to their detachment from the earlier forest environment, music performed for propitiating and entertaining ancestral spirits, healing ceremonies, and community recreation was resignified into music performance for spectacle. Comparative analysis of music from the late 1900s to the early 2000s reveals some conformity to tourism ideals for short, catchy, and standardized pieces, whose predictability facilitates more complex variation in dance choreography. Performances are “sanitized” into compact “all-in-one” presentations, which are preferred over long repetitive presentations. I relate the ideals for these performances to concepts such as the McDonaldization of society where efficiency, calculability and predictability are prioritized.

Musical analysis also shows that the earlier separate sections in which the violinist and singer demonstrated their virtuosity have merged into a more equal and heterophonic relationship. The highly ornamented chromatic running passages and virtuosic playing of the violin evolved into simpler ornamentation such as
appogiaturas, portamentos, and double stops. The traditional Mah Meri song style, utilizing two or three tones in contrasting upper and lower registers, facilitated the improvisation of text for debate purposes. The melodies now are more diatonic and are ornamented with chromatic tones such as sharp 4, flat 3 and flat 7. These choices have been determined by Mah Meri sound aesthetics that differ from the Malay choices of ornamentation for joget songs, often used in comparison to the Main Jo‘oh due to their similar musical structure.

Comparing song texts of the early and late 1900s demonstrates the changing ecology and community of the Mah Meri. Songs of the early 1900s embodied an intimacy with the flora and fauna endemic to the island. In the late 1900s, song texts reflected an evolved ecological system and a sedentary agricultural community. There was a decline in the naming of places, describing of native flora, and the description of the physical features and behavioral traits of animals. Instead, song texts described cultivated plants and domestic animals, and addressed tourism activities. Multi-thematic song texts, detached from time and space, replaced monothematic songs of the earlier period, demonstrating exposure to more local and global experiences.

The latter part of this dissertation examines the influence of power structures (hegemonies) of the new millennium on the reinvention of the Main Jo‘oh. Mah Meri song texts voice their concerns over the encroaching social problems created by modernization and globalization. Contemporary song texts seek to recapture the ethos of a simpler, pristine, and more caring society. I suggest the term pastiche in describing contemporary song text composition—the blending
of memories from the MahMeri ancestors and elders with the “invented traditions” of the contemporary generation.

With the focus on musical aesthetics shifted to the visual, a heritage of cultural elements is resignified from their previous function for visual consumption. For example, the *bunga moyang* (spirit flowers) previously used for healing ceremonies have been transferred into woven patterns for costume ornamentation. Rather than mimic the masked character it represents, the masked dancer’s performance derives from his interaction with the audience, stage props, special effects such as the smoke machine, photo opportunities for tourists, and the revolving video cameras. These examples reveal the changes in symbolic power of an object, resignified for tourist consumption, affirming Geertz’s theory of how the same symbols are given different meaning by society in changing times. They also reflect the evolution of aura as discussed by Walter Benjamin (2008) through the mechanical reproduction of the object, in this case repetitive performances for tourist.

The final chapter demonstrates how the Mah Meri comply, negotiate, and resist the intervention of tourist agents, cultural officers, and outsiders who construct mimed-music dramas and staged weddings to create “spectacle” for the tourist gaze. Evidence of colonial mimicry is seen in the tourist agent’s manipulation of events, but Mah Meri resistance is also detected. The Mah Meri respond by complying, negotiating, or resisting these interventions. Capitalizing on their indigenous knowledge, they maintain control of the presentations.
Self-Reflexivity and Positionality

The conclusions to this dissertation are influenced by my positionality as an indigenous scholar, emic from a national point of view, but etic from an ethnicity point of view. The Chinese constitute a majority ethnic group, yet they are not privileged with *bumiputera* status. Thus the Chinese are in some ways deprived in a similar way to the Mah Meri. As an ethnic Chinese, my own resistance to national autonomy may have influenced my receptiveness toward Mah Meri livelihood, lifestyle, and music. In return, my Chineseness may have made me more acceptable to the Mah Meri. As mentioned in Chapter 4, a Malay scholar had obtained many Mah Meri love songs in other villages but the Mah Meri in Kampung Sungai Bumbun spoke little of love songs. That scholar also implied that the Mah Meri used Malay *pantun* structure in their music, in mimicry of the Malay musical culture. However, among the songs I collected, the Malay *pantun* format was rare. Earlier songs were through-composed, while contemporary songs are in strophic form. Each line in the strophe was repeated twice, a Mah Meri style observed in current singing styles.

Among the eleven songs I collected, Maznah chose not to sing two songs but only record an instrumental version of them. She said she was not familiar with the new text written by Zainuddin. Perhaps these are ways in which the Mah Meri protect their heritage. They have informed me that their *moyang* warned that when you tell a story, you should never complete it, for it might be stolen and others might claim rights to it. This shows that being a more trusting ethnic group does not completely transcend the Mah Meri selective decision to provide or to hold back.
I also believe that different villages feel possessive of their own songs. I noticed that when I interviewed musicians from Kampung Sungai Judah, they were not as receptive as the musicians of Kampung Sungai Bumbun. Many questions resulted in responses such as “I don’t know” or “I have forgotten” or “it was our ancestor’s idea.” Of course, this is also due to the fact that I had already developed friendly relationships with the Mah Meri women of Kampung Sungai Bumbun in 2004. Since Kampung Sungai Judah has been JHEOA’s alternative for tourist performances, a sense of competition has arisen between them. One has to be aware of such background while establishing friendly relations. I strongly believe that the level of trust gained from informants determines the importance of information received. Developing this trust takes time and sincerity. The Mah Meri are sensitive people. They often feel that tourists and researchers enter the village to obtain information from them but fail to maintain ongoing relations. Julida Uju says that many researchers have become famous because of them but forget them thereafter.

Another issue that I faced was my contribution to the acceleration of the process of modernization. I bought a mini DVD player so that the family I lived with could listen to the music and watch the video recordings I made of them. I also introduced the latest popular cartoons to the children. The women asked me to drive them to hair salons to straighten their curly hair and to the store to buy a television, refrigerator, or clothes and shoes for their children. As much as I felt obliged to do this, I was reluctant to encourage their newly-acquired desires due to the negative effects of consumerism, consumption, and waste on the environment and and traditional values.
I was also faced with a dilemma concerning music recording and supporting an Orang Asli self-established recording company. Already described in the methodology section of Chapter 1, this incident raised the ethical issue of supporting the society, even when it may negatively impact the research project. The lack of separate recording tracks made the analysis of the rhythmic parts more challenging and forced me to rely upon my own performance experience and observations—confirming the importance of bi-musicality during fieldwork.

**Future of Mah Meri Music**

Ethnic identities will become even more complicated with the effects of globalization, e.g. migration, diasporas, and foreign workers. It will also affect the future of Mah Meri music and identity. The interaction of Mah Meri with local and global tourists, the influence of the mass media, and their adoption of modern life increases absorption of global trends.

One afternoon, while we relaxed over hot tea and desserts in the open-air shed, Maznah asked Zainuddin to accompany her singing of Main Jo’oh songs on the guitar. The Jaboi and Ganding songs (traditional Main Jo’oh songs) did not quite fit the chordal accompaniment, but Zainuddin’s recent Moyang Day composition, probably due to his frequent exposure to popular music. Also, Zainuddin had recently composed a new love song in the Mah Meri language. We made a recording
of Maznah singing it to Zainuddin’s guitar accompaniment.\textsuperscript{172} I helped them send the recording to Asyik FM (the national Orang Asli radio station) for the radio station’s latest Orang Asli song-writing competition, but it did not survive the preliminaries. The winning-song was an Orang Asli-composed song in rock style and sung in Bahasa Malaysia.

The first story shows that the Mah Meri are consciously separating their private life from their staged life. They did not use the guitar for the Main Jo’oh song performed for tourists, even though it is their current choice for leisure activity. The fact that Western chords could accompany Zainuddin latest composition, the ‘Ari Moyang (Moyang Day) Song suggests the pervasiveness of Western diatonicism. However, the insistence on recording his also recently composed love song (in diatonic scale) in Mah Meri language for the competition showed his desire to retain tradition. Mahat Cina, one of the organizers of the Orang Asli song-writing competition, told me that the radio station encouraged the use of Bahasa Malaysia as it unified the Orang Asli, whose languages were very diverse. He also mentioned that one of the criteria for judging was that the performers should sing “in tune,” with reference to western diatonism. Famous Malay singers were the selected judges (Mahat Cina, pers. comm., March 22, 2009). When the Main Jo’oh troupe watched the finalists compete on national television, they kept saying, “tu laguk Jobok” (that is Malay song). This shows that the Main Jo’oh troupe is concerned with the desire of the country to integrate them into mainstream trends.

\textsuperscript{172}This song is titled “Lihok kah Nasib E ed” and the music recording is found in the CD attached to this dissertation. There is no musical transcription to this song because it is not the focus of my dissertation.
These situations reveal the complexity of Mah Meri responses to external influences. They are constantly accommodating acceptable external influences and filtering out the unacceptable. Their reactions are based on spontaneous reactions and preferences. Therefore assuming consistent responses is not sufficient. There are many inconsistencies in Mah Meri responses. For example, although I reported that the Mah Meri are standardizing and compressing the Main Jo’oh to a less than ten minute show, at the same time, they were also exploiting the time and space provided for them during the staged “1Malaysia Marriage” presentation of ethnic weddings (Chapter 8). Although this dissertation reveals their responses to various events, there is no standard or predictable behavior, especially at a time when the village is rapidly changing.

This complexity is also demonstrated in the manner in which the Mah Meri respond to hegemonic influences such as the intervention of cultural officers. There is more resistance to the Malay cultural officer who reconstructed the Moyang Lanjut myth than to the Malay outsider or government officer who taught them professional make-up styles, and was permitted to play the female masked character, Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang. Mah Meri responses to particular events are highly individualized.

The Main Jo’oh troupe voice to journalists their concern over the depletion of nipa trees, which might affect their ability to weave their costumes from fresh leaves. Many of their comments have been published in the newspapers. However, I was surprised when Maznah told me one day, “We have to be prepared that one day there will be no more nipa leaves. I have some ideas about printing Mah Meri
weaving motives and masked figures onto cloth. We need to be prepared” (Maznah Unyan, pers. comm. July 22, 2009). Maznah’s comment reminded me of what Julida had said about never stooping so low as to beg. I believe these qualities were inherited from a time when survival meant action. Therefore, even though the Mah Meri would like to continue weaving their costumes from fresh leaves, they are preparing for changes.

From my research, I posit that within the aims of asserting identity, the Main Jo’oh is of first and foremost importance to the Mah Meri because it is a collective embodiment of the spirit of their moyang (ancestors). Although modernization has penetrated the village, there is a conscious intent to hold to traditional ways and worldviews. This is manifested in their ‘Ari Moyang ceremony. Although the culture of individualism has crept into the village, the characteristics of attachment, communality, and filial piety still exist. While the young venture out to find jobs, some return home, preferring to escape the capitalistic system and materialistic culture of the modern world.

Even if tourism did not exist, the Main Jo’oh would still continue because animism is still pervasive. Tourism is a space where Mah Meri encounter antagonistic experiences, and I posit that it is this opposing force that has stimulated Mah Meri creativity to greater heights. Ironically, tourism today is a space for the perpetuation of old traditions, although modified to suit the modern audience. While tourism has sustained the Main Jo’oh, the ‘Ari Moyang is also an important reason for its continuity. Some villages, such as Kampung Sungai Judah, still maintain the Main Jo’oh even though they are not considered to be tourist
destinations. Comparing the Main Jo’oh in Mah Meri villages unaffected by tourism merits future research. Although many say there is little music left in other Mah Meri villages such as Kampung Tanjong Sepat, Kuala Langat, or Kampung Bukit Bangkong, Sepang, on the peninsula, an examination of the music of these Mah Meri who are more integrated with the multi-ethnic communities would provide an interesting comparison. There are many inter-marriages between Mah Meri and Chinese, Malays, or Indians in these villages.

Besides the Mah Meri, there are a number of other Orang Asli groups who are also often invited to perform the tourism industry and Malaysian government. These groups include the “Jo’oh Balai Simpai” Temuan of Bukit Tadom, “Akar Umbi” Temuan of Pertak, “Tigak Naung Satuk” Temuan of Sepang, “Ketam Bangkang” Seletar of Kampung Bakar Batu Danga (Johor Bahru), “Bahbola” Kampung Kabang of Kuala Lipis, “Cenloi Semai” Gombak of Kuala Lumpur, and “Kumpulan Seri Kala” Kampung Seri Pala of Gombak.¹⁷³ Many of these groups have rejuvenated their cultural traditions due to Orang Asli movements and tourism, which call for cultural performances.

¹⁷³ I video-taped these groups’ performances at the World’s Indigenous Day Celebration organized by The Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia or jaringan Orang Asal Se-Malaysia (JOAS) at Laman Budaya Shah Alam on August 9, 2009; and at the Entrepreneurship and Cultural Carnival organized by JHEOA at the Mid Valley Exhibition Center (August 7-9, 2009).
Importance of Research and Future Areas for Study

This study is important to the field of ethnomusicology because very little has been written about Orang Asli music. These people represent the continuous cultural chain linking mainland Southeast Asia to island Southeast Asia. While the Temiar group researched by Roseman (1991) has closer connections to its northern counterparts, Mah Meri music manifests the intersection of influences from both regions. While remnants of these traditions still exist in their music, continuous encounters with the more global soundscape are increasingly affecting their music.

Although entry into the global system may change Mah Meri musical styles, the issues of ethnic identity may sustain cultural identity. I suggest that the desire to resist hegemony is actually the driving force toward heightened creativity and sustainability of cultural traditions. The reaction to an antagonist environment that threatens their identity parallels choices in musical style—to sustain indigeneity or to absorb Western musical trends. This process, in turn, parallels the dialectic of
nationalist pressures to homogenize culture stimulating a stronger indigeneity. As long as the alternating resistance and compliance persist, the remnants of indigeneity that have endured for centuries in Mah Meri music may still remain, for with every push forward inspired by global influences, there is a Mah Meri pull backward in response.

In conclusion, I suggest further comparative research among Orang Asli more and less affected by the tourism industry in Malaysia. This dissertation examines only one village promoted as a tourist site. Other Orang Asli groups selected as iconic representations of their culture for tourist performances should also be examined. This dissertation is important because it manifests how one indigenous minority group responds to and negotiates contemporary issues of tourism and globalization. Today, many indigenous minorities around the globe face similar problems, and the manner in which they respond to these hegemonies depends on what Foucault suggests as “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (Foucault 1990, 92). This dissertation is a contribution to how differing national policies, touristic structure, and degree of modernization have effects on the reconstruction of the performing traditions of a specific group with a specific *habitus*, culture, and geographical space.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Concept of Tulah and Kemali

*Tulah* also refers to a time when plants and animals were able to assume the form of human beings and tried to annihilate humankind. Plants and animals had the ability to transform and trick humans into believing they were human. Some had sexual relationships, married, or lived with human until the animals or plants found the right time to ambush and eat them. In order to save the victims, the Mah Meri elders carry out the *cincang moyang bantut* ritual (chopping the leaves of the ancestral plant which retards growth), and utter a curse, “If a tiger, be a tiger; if a man, be a man.” This curse was important for countering attack from malevolent *moyang* assuming human form to trick and devour human beings (Karim 1983: 35). The irreversibility of the curse and the Mah Meri’s ability to stop the attacks renders humans more powerful. However, this is not always so as will be seen in the discussion of *kemali*.

*Tulah* is the belief that humans and the supernatural live in two distinct worlds, suggesting that plants and animals belong to different physical domains. Human beings are not animals or plants because they are cultured, and governed by codes of conduct that distinguish them from animals and plants. After stealing the book of conduct from Moyang Melur, Moyang Kapir distributed it to the Mah Meri (Karim 1981, Nowak 1987, Werner 1997). From then onwards, humans stopped incestuous relationships, and thus, became differentiated from animals. Humans
also order their lives through the institutions of marriage, family structure, inheritance, and leadership hierarchy.

Kemali

The concept of mali or pemali is explained as “something which is tabooed.” (Gimlette and Thomson 1939: 156-126). According to Karim (1981: 45), the concept of kemali is related to the belief that all plants and animals originate form the mangat (souls) of dead humans. For this reason, plants and animals possess human characteristics. The component of the soul of the dead called mangat lajin (energetic soul), which does not make the journey to the first stop in the overworld, is said to enter the womb of pregnant animals and to creep into young plants. Plants and animals share a component of the souls of humans. If they are killed or destroyed, it is perceived as an act wrongfully committed, and they seek vengeance whenever humans attempt to destroy them in any way. Humans may annoy plants by brushing against the leaves, damaging roots or stems, cutting them down, or defecating nearby. Plants may avenge these offences by using a part of themselves as a weapon or by invoking their supernatural powers and causing illness to the offender (Karim 1981: 45).

The notions of tulah and kemali contrast with each other, tulah states that Mah Meri ancestors have cursed plants and humans to remain as they are, therefore humans are free to consume them. However, the breach of kemali through activities such as harvesting without permission from spirits will result in sickness or natural calamity. In the past, the notions of tulah and kemali were crucial to Mah Meri
livelihood that demands daily interaction with nature, such as fishing, hunting, and gathering crabs and prawns.

The concepts of *tulah* and *kemali* have been governing the way of life of the Mah Meri for centuries. Adherence to these concepts has constructed a sense of fear and respect for the natural order. The Mah Meri exposure to the vast dangers of treacherous mangrove swamps, open seas, and forests made these concepts important to their survival. It is difficult however, for the Mah Meri children of today to adhere to these concepts when their livelihood is not dependent on surrounding dangerous rivers and forests. These concepts have therefore eroded, especially with the introduction of modernization and global worldviews.
APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY

In the list, Mah Meri, Malay and Chinese words are indicated by (unmarked), (M), (C), respectively, following each entry.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreign terms</th>
<th>English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'ari</td>
<td>day</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Ari Moyang</td>
<td>Ancestral Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>a’aa</td>
<td>tiger</td>
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<td>adat</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>anting-anting</td>
<td>earrings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baik buruk (M)</td>
<td>good and bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baju kebaya (M)</td>
<td>female Malay attire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bakau</td>
<td>mangrove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bakul</td>
<td>basket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bangsa (M)</td>
<td>race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baning</td>
<td>tortoise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>banjeng</td>
<td>plucked bamboo-tubed zither</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basuh (M)</td>
<td>wash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>batik</td>
<td>printed cloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belanak kawah</td>
<td>grey mullet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belangkas</td>
<td>horse-shoe crab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>berentak balei</td>
<td>the rhythm of the dance hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bersanding (M)</td>
<td>bridal exhibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biawak</td>
<td>large lizard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biola (M)</td>
<td>violin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boi</td>
<td>sugar cane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Btsisi’, Besisi, Ma Betisek</td>
<td>Mah Meri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buai anak (M)</td>
<td>lull the baby to sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buai tetap</td>
<td>Mah Meri game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buan</td>
<td>rambutan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bujam</td>
<td>pandanus woven pouches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bumiputera (M)</td>
<td>sons of the soil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bunga (M)</td>
<td>flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bunga bintang</td>
<td>star flower, spirit flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bunga jering</td>
<td>jering flower, spirit flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bunga moyang</td>
<td>spirit flowers. Young nipa leaves plaited to represent life on the earth and sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burung puyuh</td>
<td>quail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>busut</td>
<td>mound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caklempong (M)</td>
<td>gong chime ensemble from Negeri Sembilan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
cendol (M)  dessert made from coconut milk
chamai  betel-nut
chamai gasik  wild betel-vine
chanchang  wild jungle tree
Cheep Gunting  peacock pheasant
dangdut (M)  popular music with Indian influence
dek  don’t
dendan  skirt
dian  durian
ding tengkhing  bamboo stamping tubes
eaglewood  wood to make incense
egap kedoh  bride capture ritual
Gabang  wild jungle fruit
gage  pennywort
gajah (M)  elephant
gambang  wooden xylophone
gelang  wristband
gendang (M)  double headed drum
gende  mother
ginggong  wooden xylophone
gulai  stew, gravy
gunting  peacock pheasant
gutta percha  latex tree
haduk  house
haduk moyang  house of ancestral spirit
hae  people
hamba Malayu (M)  Malay slaves
hentok  banana
hudak  Prawns, shrimps
hui (C)  secret societies
ikan  climbing perch
ikan lumba  dolphin
ikan sumpit  archer fish
jereng  tree with purplish pods
jintan  cumin
jo’oh  indigenous dance or songs
joget  Malay styled dance
joget  Malay social dance, or “to dance”
joget (M)  dance or “to dance”
jule  violin
ka himang  mackerel fish
kamcing  cordial relationship, buddies, cliques
kanang  rattan for making attap
kancil  mouse deer
kanjik  cashew nuts
katak rengkong  toad
katuk j my  tooth filing
kayu terap  bark wood
kecapi (M)  bowed spiked fiddle
kedoh  wife
kedol  female
kejel  sweet potato
kemali  breach of codes
kmian  benzoin
kenon  child
kentot  grandchild
kepah  clams
kepau  fan palm
keranting  plucked bamboo tube zither
keris  dagger
ketab  crabs
ketab bangsal  mangrove crabs
ketab Gadeng  mud Lobster
ketab tipak  ghost crabs
ketu meri  wild pig
kijang  roe deer
knduri hum  bathing ritual
koleh  dessert
kongsi (C  clan
kugiran (M)  Malaysian “rock ‘n roll,” popular in the 60s
lalang (M)  grass
lang  eagle
lang kuit  flying fox
lemak (M)  fat, rich
lemol  male
lipan  centipede
lokan  clams
ludat  wild jungle fruit
macam-macam (M)  variety
Mah  people
Main Jo’oh  Mah Meri music and dance genre, drinking festival,
makna (M)  meaning
maman  wild jungle fruit
mandi bunga (M)  flower bath
mayang  palm blossom
mengasah gigi (M)  tooth filing
meranti  mangrove wood
merbau  timber wood
Meri  Forest
meriah (M)  joyous
merisik (M)  enquiry
miang boi (M)  substance from sugar cane that causes itch
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>minang</td>
<td>marriage proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monyet</td>
<td>monkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang</td>
<td>ancestral spirit, guardian spirit, animal or plant spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang Gadeng</td>
<td>guardian spirit of Kampung Sungai Mata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang Amai</td>
<td>guardian spirit of Kampung Sungai Salang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang Keteg</td>
<td>guardian spirit of Kampung Sungai Bumbun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang Keramat</td>
<td>guardian spirit of Jugra Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang Lanjut</td>
<td>female Ancestral spirit that guards the route to Fruit Island (Mah Meri’s concept of heaven)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang Melur</td>
<td>ancestral spirit who fell off the moon into the sky and brought disease from the fifth and sixth world onto the earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang Pongkol</td>
<td>tiger spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyang Puteri Gunung Ledang</td>
<td>spirit of the Princess of Ledang Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mui bangar</td>
<td>one cauldron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musang</td>
<td>civet cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngale</td>
<td>cassava, tapioca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nibong</td>
<td>palm tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nyireh batu</td>
<td>species of mangrove wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nyireh bunga</td>
<td>species of mangrove wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nyireh tree</td>
<td>mangrove tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nyiru</td>
<td>coconut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>opoh</td>
<td>extended family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orang Asli (M)</td>
<td>original people of the land (indigenous people )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pahuk</td>
<td>dugout canoe/ boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pakat sama (M)</td>
<td>plan and work together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pallas</td>
<td>type of leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>panduk</td>
<td>deer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pangar</td>
<td>altar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patung (M)</td>
<td>sculptor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punan</td>
<td>state of deprivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pembayang (M)</td>
<td>shadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pentas joget</td>
<td>stage for dancing joget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pepat</td>
<td>mangrove plant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perarakan (M)</td>
<td>procession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>periau</td>
<td>shoots of meranti tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pinang</td>
<td>areca nut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plamin</td>
<td>bridal stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pulai</td>
<td>mangrove wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pulut</td>
<td>glutinous rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pusat Kraf (M)</td>
<td>Craft Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rakit (M)</td>
<td>raft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rantai</td>
<td>chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rebab</td>
<td>bowed spiked fiddle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rebana (M)</td>
<td>single framed drum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ronggeng (M)  social dance of Portuguese origins
rusa  deer
sagun  dessert made from fried desiccated coconut
Sam Po Kong  admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho)
sanggul (M)  bun
sapi lidi (M)  stick broom made from palm
sempil tembakau  rolled tobacco
Si-Ooi  coppersmith barbet (bird)
siamang  black-handed gibbon
siamang timbong  white handed gibbon
silat (M)  Malay martial arts
simpang  sash
songkho  head dress
subang  earrings or rings
tambo  double headed laced drum
tawak  knobbed Gong
tenggiri  mackerel
tepung tawar  grinded raw rice and water made into cool liquid
topeng (M)  mask
trimbow  myth of origin
tukar ganti  exchange
tulah  curse
tungtung  bamboo stamping tubes
ukup  anoints with smoke from benzoin
upeh nibung  palm frond
wayang kulit (M)  shadow play
APPENDIX C

MUSICAL TRANSCRIPTIONS

The musical transcriptions are arranged in alphabetical order according to titles in the Mah Meri language.

Songs of the Late 1900s (refer to Chapter 5 for transcription)

1. Kampat Song (pages 164-167)
2. Labos Song (pages 173-179)

Main Jo'oh Repertoire (Early 2000s)

1. Lagu ‘Ari Moyang ('Ari Moyang Day Song)(pages 389-400)
2. Lagu Balaw (Balaw Song)(pages 401-418)
3. Lagu Ganding (Ganding Song)(pages 419-436)
4. Lagu Jaboi (Jaboi Song)(pages 437-453)
5. Lagu Kuwang Kuit (Kuwang Kuit Song)(pages 454-466)
6. Lagu Musang (Civet Cat Song)(pages 467-476)
7. Lagu Pera Gunting (Pera Gunting Song)(pages 477-485)
8. Lagu Sidud (Sidud Song)(pages 486-500)
9. Lagu Tok Naning (Tok Naning Song)(pages 501-514)

Other recordings (transcription not included in this dissertation)

10. Si’ Ooi Instrumental (Si’Ooi Song Instrumental Piece)
11. Gemah Lebat Instrumental (Heavy Rain Instrumental Piece)

CD Recording

(The CD recording is on file in the Ethnomusicology Archives of the Music Department of University of Hawai’i at Manoa)
LAGU ‘ARI MOYANG
(ANCESTRAL DAY SONG)

Song text: Zainuddin Unyan & Mznah Unyan
Composer: Zainuddin Unyan
Transcription: Clare Chan

© Mah Meri Kampung Sungai Bambun, Carey Island, Selangor, Malaysia
'Ari Moyang Song
'Ari Moyang Song
LAGU BALAW
(BALAW SONG)

Joget-style Song

Song text: Zainuddin Utyan & Ranggun Seman
Transcription: Clare Chan

© Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island, Selangor
Balaw Song

Verse 2
1:23min
Balaw Song

Ju.

Voc.

gar  Te  bas  bhu  kur  ke  nak  kor  hik  hug  Goh  ma  hang

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Tow.

Ju.

Voc.

ka  be  pan  gar  le  pas  a  yik  hik  e  dek  e  hok  A  sik

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Tow.
Balaw Song

Ju.

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Taw.
LAGU GANDING
(GANDING SONG)

Joget-style Song

Song Text: Maznah Unyan
Transcription: Clare Chan

© Mah Meri of Kampung Sangai Bumbun, Carey Island, Selangor
Ganding Song

Jule

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Taw.

Jule

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Taw.
Ganding Song

Jule

Voc.

diangdi nang diangdi nang diangdi nang dinang diangdi nang

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Taw.
LAGU JABOI
(JABOI SONG)

Jo-oh style

Song text: Maznah Unyan & Samah Seman
Transcription: Clare Chan

©Mak Meri Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island
Jaboi Song

Ju.

Voc.

gre  na  hok  la  gu  Ja  bus  mo  yang  Ja  bus  na  hok  la  gu  Ja  bus

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Tav.

Jule Instrumental
2:23min

Ju.

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Tav.
LAGU KUWANG KUIT
(KUWANG KUIT SONG)

Song text: Traditional (anonymous) &
Zainuddin Unyan
Transcription: Clare Chan

© Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island, Selangor
Kuwang Kuit Song

Verse 1
0:24mm

Ju

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Tow.

Ju

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Tow.
Kuwang Kuit Song

Verse 2
8:30min

Ju

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Tow.

Ju

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Tow.
Kuwang Kuit Song

Verse 1 (Reprise)
2:27min

Ju

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Taw.

Ku wang ku wang ku it me li bat da un ba

109
110
111
112
113
114
115

101
102
103
104
105
106
107
108
Kuwang Kuit Song
Jude Instrumental
3:06min

Ju

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Taw.

Ju

Voc.

Banj.

Tamb.

Tung.

Taw.
LAGU MUSANG
(MUSANG SONG)

Song text: Zainuddin Unyau
Transcription: Clare Chan

© Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bambun, Carey Island, Selangor
Musang Song

475
LAGU PERA GUNTING  
(PERA GUNTING SONG)
Pera Gunting Song

Verse 4

Ju

Voc.

Banj.

Tomb.

Tung.

Tow.
Pera Gunting Song
Pera Gunting Song

Ju

Voc.

Kamj.

Tombr.

Tong.

Taw.
LAGU SIDUD
(SIDUD SONG)

Song text: Samah Seman & Zainuddin Unyan
Transcription: Clare Chan

© Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island, Selangor
LAGU TOK NANING
(TOK NANING SONG)

Jo'oh style

Song text: Traditional (Anonymous)
Transcription: Clare Chan

© Mah Meri of Kampung Sungai Bambun, Carey Island, Selangor
Tok Naning Song
Tok Naning Song
Tok Naning Song
Tok Naning Song

Verse 2 (Reprise)
3:3/4 time

Julie

Voc.

Bunj.

Tumb.

Tung.

Taw.
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