

A Documentation of *Mah Meri* Indigenous Ceremonial Attire and Ancestral Day Event Stages

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Abstract

Cultural sustainability activities are seen as strategies for ensuring the sustainability of culture and beliefs among indigenous tribes. Yet, there are a few challenges encountered by the *Mah Meri* tribe, especially in preserving their culture. The gap of discussion is in elaborating on the attire and the *Mah Meri* involvement throughout the ancestral event festival. Without such documentation, this heritage treasure may disappear and be lost in modernisation. The present case study was located at the (i) Judah Village, Carey Island (ii) *Hari Moyang Laut* cultural event located at Judah Village, Carey Island, about 77 km away from Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews and observation were used to gather data before, during, and after the eventful possession of the ancestral day. Findings suggest that *Hari Moyang* or ancestral day involves several important stages, the initial stage, the planning stage, the event, and the event closure. Secondly, such intricacy of *Nipah* leaves woven into dresses has intimate meaning to the wearer. This practice has created the uniqueness of the tribe that differentiates it from other tribes. Thirdly, the staging of this heritage event is not without challenges. Among the challenges are time constraints and financial requirements. This documentation shall serve as a vital heritage preservation suitable for enduring such a present modernisation wave.

Keywords

Indigenous, Cultural Event, Ancestral Event, Tourism, Malaysia

1. Introduction

A cultural event is one of the many events that serve as tourist attraction factors to fascinate several tourists to a country. In the year 2021 alone, there are more than 100 thousand tourists' arrivals in Malaysia, yet the contribution of cultural events and the uniqueness of each indigenous festival event are still unclear. One of the many cultural events in Malaysia is by *Orang Asli* or the indigenous people of Malaysia. There are more than 18 indigenous tribes in the country, and among all the tribes, *Mah Meri* whose members are more than 1000 dwells in the residential area at Carey Island in Selangor, Malaysia. They are well known for conserving their cultural events and beliefs. One of the famous attractions for its cultural events is *Hari Moyang* (Ancestral festival) also known as *Ayek' Moyang*. This event is organized every year by the *Mah Meri* tribe as a symbol of respect for their ancestors.

Mah Meri is a tribe from an aboriginal ethnic group of *Senoi* (Roddin, Yusof, Awang, & Warman, 2017a) and its language is from the Austroasiatic branch which originated from the Mon and Khmer language family. This language is used as a medium of communication in the *Mah Meri* tribe (Kunasekaran & Gill, 2016). "*Besisi*" is the language daily used by most of *Mah Meri* at Carey Island and the young generation also used the *Malay* language to converse with other indigenous groups that they learned from school. *Mah Meri* is one of the tribes in Malaysia, they also fluently use *Bahasa Melayu* as a medium of communication with other communities in Malaysia. Only a few of *Mah Meri* can communicate in English especially to entertain tourists during a cultural performance.

This tribe is also known for its wood carvings and woven crafts articles (Ibrahim, Butler, & Kennedy, 2011). Wood carving skills are specially used to produce ceremonial masks. The masks are produced by using *Pulai* wood (*Alstonia* spp./Milk/White cheese wood), which is based on lightweight whitish wood, and as the supply for this type of wood is limited, carvers have changed to *Nyireh Batu* wood (*Xylocarpus mekongensis*/*X. moluccensis*) which is a rosy hardwood. The mask carving is an indication of their respect for predecessors and *Moyang* is a word utilized for a mask that alludes to the ancestors and is decorated with paint and plaits from *Nipah* (*Nypa fruticans*/Nipa palm) leaves. The use of mask carving is specially meant for the storytelling of distinctive legends, dreams, and folk tales of the past (Wahab, Abdullah, Astuti, Aizal, & Rohaizad, 2020). The use of natural resources has become a challenge due to lack of supplies, thus, to ensure cultural sustainability, several strategies need to be taken by all parties. The issue of cultural sustainability, especially the *Mah Meri* tribe attracts the at-

tention of UNESCO.

UNESCO has certified the *Mah Meri* wood sculpture of baby monkeys (Simping, Salehuddin, Zahari, & Hanafiah, 2018) as a feature of the *Mah Meri* culture. With this opportunity lurking, the *Mah Meri* tribe gets to promote their arts at the Indigenous People Art Museum, Kuala Lumpur (Dawum, 2021). Roddin, Yusof, Awang and Warman (2017a) elaborated that the main *Jo'oh* dance which tempts the ancestral spirit to join the *Hari Moyang* festival is used to promote *Mah Meri* cultural tourism along with other dances. These dances have taken them beyond the local scene and brought tourism advancement to their community as compared to the others. However, there are several challenges faced by the *Mah Meri* tribe in preserving their culture and beliefs. As mentioned earlier, a lack of natural resources due to land clearance and the change of lifestyle among Generation Y are the two main challenges that need to be addressed by the government to ensure cultural sustainability among the *Mah Meri* tribe. Thus, cultural activities are seen as strategies for ensuring the sustainability of culture and beliefs among indigenous tribes.

Many studies have been conducted to understand the underpinning issues of the indigenous peoples particularly on education (Harun, Haron, Ibrahim, Kamaruddin, & Abd Rahman, 2015), economy (Loke, Lim, & Campos-Arceiz, 2020), food-seeking behaviour (Gan et al., 2020) and other issues, yet the understanding of culture and beliefs of indigenous people is still lacking (Macpherson, Tretiakov, Mika, & Felzensztein, 2021). Therefore, understanding cultural event performance such as organizing event festivals is deemed important to ensure cultural sustainability among the indigenous people in Malaysia.

Apart from the *Hari Moyang* festival, the famous cultural event performance of *Mah Meri* is *Jo'oh*. It is known as mask dance or *Mayin Jo-oh* (Ibrahim et al., 2011). The dance is presented by the *Mah Meri* people for weddings, *Hari Moyang* festival, and different blissful events to welcome the spirit of predecessors who participate in the festival. The dance involves two men wearing masks known as *Tok Pongkola* and *Tok Nania*. Both are wearing special clothes (Wahab et al., 2020). There are also other predecessors involved during the event's festival, yet their involvement is rarely discussed by scholars.

Based on the literature search, there is a gap in discussion elaborating on *Mah Meri* attire and their involvement throughout the event's festival. There are reasons and purposes for each attire. The form and function of the *Mah Meri* attire are also deemed to be a significant element of the dance. There is also minimal academic documentation and analysis of *Mah Meri's Hari Moyang*. Most discussions are in personal or NGOs' blogs. Thus, the questions that guide the present study are (i) What is the process of organizing the *Mah Meri* cultural event? (ii) What significance does the preparation of clothing and decoration during the event mean? (iii) What are the challenges throughout the process of organizing the event? This documentation shall serve as a vital heritage preservation suitable for enduring such a present modernisation wave.

2. Literature Review

There are a few challenges encountered by the *Mah Meri* tribe, especially in preserving their culture. The first challenge is due to the scarcity of natural resources such as pandanus clumps as the result of land clearance which leads to the loss of raw materials and supplies in the woven craft (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2011). Secondly, the indigenous Generation Y who was born between the early 1980s to early 2000s known as millennials possess a minimal interest in cultural activities. They grew up in the digital technology era where the medium of learning and communication are mass media, computers, mobile phones, the internet, and social media (Chan, 2018). One of the reasons is their awareness of the need for education and the transformation of learning from ancestral lineages to institutionalized learning acquired from a teacher outside the *Orang Asli* cultural background. This factor poses a challenge for *Mah Meri* and any indigenous tribe to sustain their culture.

The indigenous community believes that if one does not practice and maintain their cultural values then they will have psychological and physical problems later in their lives (McCormick & Wong, 2007). Thus, it remains a challenge for indigenous entrepreneurship survival as nowadays some of the indigenous young generations live in the resettlement area which is near to the local community or town. They are exposed to media, computers, mobile phones, the internet, and social media as these digital technologies also have become part of their primary mediums of learning and communication. The indigenous community owns mobile phones that provide access to communication technologies such as the Internet, WhatsApp (free messaging apps available on smartphones), and Facebook, enabling mobile phone users to communicate with a larger world beyond their villages (Chan, 2018). For instance, the *Semai* indigenous youth enjoy singing popular songs accompanied by a live music band or karaoke station in their villages. These young musicians render their selections of popular *Malay*, Indonesian, Thai, and *Orang Asli* songs on a typical 1960s-style four-piece band comprised of a guitarist, bassist, drummer, and solo singer. The *Semai* elders, adults, teenagers, and children dance the *runggeng*, *joget*, *cha-cha*, and other modern dances from evening until dawn (Ching, 2009).

Aside from dances, there are also other handcrafted indigenous products. Woven products such as baskets, bracelets, bookmarks, and *bujamare* made from species of thorny pandanus, palm leaves, and other materials (Roddin, Yusof, Mohamed Yusof, Ibrahim Mukhtar, & Muhamad Hanafi, 2017b). The spiritual mask wood carving of *Mah Meri* is also significant during such cultural events. Both natural tourism products contribute to tourism development (Kunasekaran & Gill, 2016) as the *Mah Meri* community has managed to preserve a traditional spiritual woodcarving that is of high quality and artistry (Tasnim *et al.*, 2016).

One of the ceremonial events organised by *Mah Meri* is *Hari Moyang Laut* cultural event. So far, not much is known about the cultural ceremony of the

Mah Meri tribe. The existing work of the tribe relates to culture and traditions (Carey, 1973; Chan, 2010; Pang et al., 2014; Rahim, 2007; Wardhana et al., 2014), belief system (Mokhtar & Aini, 2014; Wazir-Jahan, 1981; Werner, 1997), arts and language (Coluzzi, Riget, & Xiaomei, 2016; Ching, 2009; Radzi, 2003, 2004; Stevens, Kruspe, & Hajek, 2006), health (Wan Norlida et al., 2007), environment (Rahman, 2010; Haliza, 2010), economics and social (Harun, 2015; Kunasekaran, Gill, Talib, & Redzuan, 2013; Lai, 2016; Majin et al., 2016; Roddin & Sidi, 2013; Roddin et al., 2015), and tourism (Kunasekaran et al., 2017; Roddin, Yusof, Awang, & Warman, 2017a; Shah et al., 2018; Ting & Abella, 2017).

Therefore, the present study is meant to document the cultural ceremony of the *Mah Meri* tribe known as *Hari Moyang Laut* so that the younger generations and the public, in general, can learn the uniqueness of the event, the hardship they endure during the event preparation, and the spirit and the values that they show during the preparation and implementation of the event. Furthermore, it is also important to highlight the need for preserving this unique culture and the assistance required for this purpose.

3. Research Methodology

According to Yin (2011), a case study involves an organisation, programme, or individual reporting and it involves several parameters surrounding the case. In this study, the parameters were set as (i) Judah Village, Carey Island (ii) *Hari Moyang Laut* cultural event located at Judah Village, Carey Island, about 77km away from Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. This study involves the community at *Sungai Judah* Village which is only located 5 minutes from *Sungai Bumbun* Village. *Sungai Bumbun* Village is also known for its cultural attraction. Our main contribution to the literature is the indigenous values and beliefs during the process of organizing *Hari Moyang Laut* festival. Our contribution was to demonstrate the process of organizing a *Hari Moyang Laut* event at River Village, Judah, Carey Island, Selangor, and the clothes that they wear during the ceremony.

Quality research inquiry has been used as a method for understanding the phenomenon and the context of the study. The *Mah Meri* tribe at Judah Village, Carey Island was chosen in this study as it is well known for its spiritual cultural activities of preserving culture as a tourism product.

A total of three (3) semi-structured interviews and observations were used to gather data. A semi-structured interview is a method that is based on structured and unstructured questions. The interviewer is more flexible in using words. The interview protocols were developed before the interview sessions. There were three (3) informants involved during the interview. The three (3) informants were chosen from Judah Village and one officer from *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli Malaysia* (JAKOA). In strengthening the understanding of *Hari Moyang Laut* at Judah Village, Carey Island as a case study, the researchers followed the below procedure:

1) Develop an underpinning model based on the current literature on *Mah Meri* culture in Malaysia and conduct literature synthesis. Hence, a preliminary investigation was carried out. A discussion with *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli Malaysia* brought to light the need to investigate the proposed context of cultural events among *Mah Meri* on *Hari Moyang Laut* festival.

2) Develop research objectives to (1) understand the process of organising *Hari Mayang Laut* at Judah Village, Carey Island Malaysia and (2) explore the preparation of cloth, decoration, and choice of food during the event.

3) Develop the interview and observation protocols based on the research objectives.

Interviews and observations were conducted as the method for collecting the data during the event. The data collection was conducted between 15 Mac until 30 September 2022. The informants were divided into two groups. The 1st group is the villagers who are involved during the event and the second group is government officers. The researchers were also involved during the event as active participants observing the research protocols. Active participant observation is a technique used by researchers to collect data while being part of the participant. Observation is the process of gathering open-ended, first-hand data by observing people and places at a research site (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

In this study, the research site was at the area of Carey Island, Selangor from Judah Village to the sea at Carey Island, Selangor. The researchers also observed the entire process of organizing the event from day one which is the day for the *Panglima Hitam* (black warrior) celebration, the building up of the castle also known as *mahligai* by *Mah Meri*. The *mahligai* was built in the middle of the re-sided ocean, the making of decoration for the event until the end of the event which is called "*kenduri*". The *kenduri* is an event where all the villagers are served food such as fruits, cookies, and drinks.

Observation is a technique that requires a researcher to see impressions and feelings or emotions. Merriam (2009) elaborated that observation involves several activities. The activities include checking the physical setting or environment, the context, the behaviour, and the design. This includes observing the participants involved in the event and the number of people attending the event. During the event, the researchers are to be attentive to any interactions and activities, conversations, and emotional expressions during the observation (Merriam, 2009). All these factors need to be observed throughout the event. Thus, the researchers are required to be very sensitive and observant in detailing each of the event's activities.

The researchers observed that the event began at 10 a.m. after all the villagers gathered near a place that is called *Balai*. *Balai* is just near *Tok Batin's* house. It is a place of gathering for meetings, ceremonies, or *kenduri*. All the villagers began by walking from *Balai* to be nearer to the Carey Island Sea. It took about an hour of walking with songs and dancing by all the villagers. They were led by *Moyang Bangku*, *Moyang Bajus*, *Ninik Putri* and their entourage. They were singing a

traditional *Mah Meri* song and were accompanied by music devices such as fluid, gong, and violin. All of them were very happy as they sang and danced. Triangulation and peer review techniques were used to ensure the validity and reliability of the information (**Table 1**).

The data were analysed using a constant comparison technique. A constant comparison technique compares segments within and across categories. This technique refers to the development of constructs that are linked together by a theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Boije (2010) stated that there are four phases involved in the constant comparison procedure. The first phase is exploration, and the aim is to discover the concepts. This phase involves coding the data with special codes. Coding is the process by which categories of responses are established for open-ended questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Coding means “categorising segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarises and accounts for each piece of data” (cited in Charmaz, 2006; Boije, 2010: p. 95). The themes or categories in the research were named by attributing a code, which is a label that describes the core topic of the study. For this reason, the selection of attributes that describe the code is required as it leads to the concept that later constitutes a theory. This is supported by Corbin and Strauss’s (2014) three types of coding: open, axial, and selective.

Open coding is a process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising data”. The open code that reflects the quotation is lacking in terms of financial capability, time, and source of income; therefore, the researchers used the axial coding which represents the summary of all open coding resources. Coding is referred to as a “set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding by making connections between categories” (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This coding is more of an abstracting process and consists of coding around several single categories or axes. Axial coding is also called focus coding because the coding is based on categories and moves to subcategories, and it is more specific (Charmaz, 2006). The main purpose of axial coding is to determine which elements in the research are dominant and which are not. Therefore, in the context of the study, the axial coding was “resourceful”, and finally, all the sub-codes were categorised into selective coding. Thus, in this study, the selective code can be seen as the main code or theme or is known as the “challenge.”

Table 1. Triangulation and peer review techniques.

Items	Details
Transcription	A4: If you observe, a spiritual leader is possessed by three spirits. The spirits are <i>Ninik’ Putri</i> , <i>Ninik Janggut Hitam</i> and <i>Ninik’ Janggut Putih</i> which are based on the character and the way the spiritual leader behaves.
Photo	Please refer Figure 1
Transcription	A3: During the possession, he is not aware of the situation during the day.

The reliability of this research is based on the triangulation method used to compare the data from interviews, observations, and secondary documents. The triangulation method enables researchers to cross-check the identified themes with all the results from *Tok Batin*, ancestor, and *Orang Asli Department Officer* (JAKOA). Several authors (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2003; Merriam, 2009) have argued that the use of the triangulation method is an effective strategy for ensuring the reliability of the information. The data collection information was validated by validation of the transcribed information. In addition, the validity of the information was certified using an observation protocol and several interview protocols. These authors have consistently clarified that the validity of the research is derived from their strategies for data exploration using the interview protocol. The stage of constant comparison also involves documents such as newspapers, company reports, and magazines, which are another form of triangulation. In other words, triangulation is a technique where multiple data sources are compared and cross-checked (Merriam, 2009).

The validity and reliability of this study are determined based on the triangulation method. The peer-reviewed technique was used as a validity technique to ensure the validity of the information and researchers' understanding during the process of organising the event. The researcher visited *Tok Batin* and several people involved during the event, three weeks after the event and after the researchers had completed the research report.

4. Results and Discussion

The researchers began the exploration of this study by interviewing *Tok Batin* who is the leader of Judah Village, Carey Island. The reason for the interview was to get an in-depth understanding of the culture of *Mah Meriat* Judah Village at Carey Island, Selangor. According to *Tok Batin*, there were more than 150 houses in the village and most of the villagers worked as fishermen as the village is near Carey Island. Some of the villagers worked in the nearby areas at manufacturing companies, and agricultural sector and were involved as small entrepreneurs, however, to the best of *Tok Batin's* knowledge none of them worked as tour operators. Only a few of them in the village who are experts in handicrafts are involved as tourism product suppliers for craft products.

Tok Batin further explained that there are two types of *Hari Moyang* festival. This festival is categorised according to *Hari Moyang Laut* and *Hari Moyang Darat*. However, as the researchers were only involved as active participants and observers during *Hari Moyang Laut*, therefore, the discussion in this study focuses only on *Hari Moyang Laut* which was celebrated from 1st February to 5th February 2022, in Judah Village, Carey Island, Selangor, Malaysia.

Hari Moyang Laut began with the ceremony of *Panglima Hitam*. The ceremony was organised several days before the *Hari Moyang Laut* festival. It took about a month to prepare the ceremony, beginning with a simple ceremony of getting permission from the ancestor, building up *mahligaior* a castle, and

creating accessories for dancers and all community members that involved in the event. The ceremony of *Hari Moyang Laut* began with the *Panglima Hitam* birthday celebration that involves several ancestors such as *Bangku Moyang*, and dancers.

4.1. What Is the Process of Organizing the *Mah Meri* Cultural Event?

4.1.1. Initiation Stage

The initiating stage began with a discussion between *Tok Batin* and all villagers at Judah Village, Carey Island. It involved all community members at Judah Village. Such discussion lingered on the roles to be executed in managing the event, especially in luring the spirits of their ancestors to join the event. Without *Moyang's* participation, such a ceremony is considered unsuccessful.

4.1.2. Planning Stage

It involved the planning of the event, especially on the date, time, and all activities involved during the event. The discussion was led by *Tok Batin*. During the planning stage, all of the villagers were involved, and tasks were delegated among them. During the planning stage, ideas and suggestions were made by the villagers. This is because, although the ceremony is organised every year, the experience is different from one year to another year.

4.1.3. Implementation Stage

The implementation stage involved several event stakeholders such as Tok Batin and all the community members at Judah Village, Carey Island, Selangor, *Jabatan Kemajuan Kesenian Negara*, Tourism Selangor, and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Art. The involvement of these parties is significant to glorify such ceremonial events and make initial preparations worthwhile.

4.1.4. The Event

During the stage of organising, there were several stakeholders involved for instance *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli* Malaysia, Tourism Selangor, the Ministry of Tourism Art and Culture, and the safety force. Each of the event's stakeholders has its tasks before, during, and after the event. During the event, the ceremony started with the celebration of *Panglima Hitam's* birthday. On the second day, it involved visiting seven stages of the ancestral ceremony and on the last day it involved an ancestral ceremony at *Mahligai* near the sea. The event was led by *Tok Batin* during the planning stage and the event, the event was led by *Moyang Bangku*. The event was monitored by *Tok Batin* who is the leader of the village, however, during the ceremony, the event was coordinated by *Moyang Bangku*.

4.1.5. Event Closure

The event ended with an event called *kenduri*; which refers to the gathering of all villagers involved, and they were served with food and drinks. This gives a sense of relief and gratitude for the willingness of their *Moyang* to join and bless

the event. The prayers henceforth include wealth, health, and blessings.

4.2. What Significance Does the Preparation of Clothing and Decoration during the Event Mean?

4.2.1. The Preparation of Clothing

Overall, the ceremonial clothing was observed as preliminarily plotted. Different events require different costumes, thus demanding early preparation. These demands range from purpose and type of spirit summoned to possession and location. When the purpose of the event is to call for prosperity, vibrant colours are worn. They typically used darker colours like black to indicate the embodiment of three spirits, which intensified the emersion of one into the possessional ceremony. Land or sea locale shall vary the type of spirit being summoned.

The roles and functions of devotees will determine the type of clothing to wear. The head shaman will wear a much-elaborated design and embellishment. The attraction is mainly focused on the impressive mask. This main companion will also be dressed in a detailed twirly. With utmost pride, they danced to the low tide and called upon the spirits to intoxicate them with devotion and serenity.

In the Mah Meri culture, ladies wore extensively adorned costumes. The *Mah Meri* female clothing too warrants elongated preparation. Planning includes harvesting adequate Nipah strands to produce hugely bodied frails which will move gracefully following the wind and the beat of the drum.

4.2.2. On Decoration and Adornment

The sophistication of each Nipah strand is undoubted as it was softened through rigorous pressing to straighten them and then arranged to form such flowy skirts portraying the *Mah Meri* commitment and devotion to their *Moyang*. A much-hardened *Nipah* strand will be maneuvered in such a way that cherishes the expertise of each weaver as a geometrical formation is visible revealing such boldness, piety, and holiness dedication to their *Moyang*. Circular flowers from Nipah were created by folding in the leaves. Yet, each leaf is minutely slit to form spike-like winged frails. Their headpieces are equivalent to any fairy-like imaginary beings. This denotes eagerness to be near resemblance to such spirits and their *Moyang*.

Overall, the tedious effort put into the preparation of such a cultural ceremonial event needs to be cherished as a sincere dedication to the Mah Meri beliefs. Thus, such events must be documented as a national heritage before being forgotten and replaced by modernisation.

The *Hari Moyang* ceremony was led by *Moyang Bangku* who is a person that was chosen by the ancestor to be the leader during the event. Based on researchers' observation, *Moyang Bangku* was wearing a black shirt, and the attire is like *baju Melayu* from Malay people in Malaysia.

Based on researchers' observation, one of the ancestors might possessed a man who is wearing black attire and a headpiece, a shoulder sash, and a fringe skirt (refer to **Figure 1**) and based on personnel interview with Tok Batin, the spiritual



Figure 1. A spiritual leader is possessed by three spirits; *Ninik Putri*, *Ninik Janggut Hitam* and *Ninik Janggut Putih*.

leader was possessed by spirit from *Ninik Putri*, *Ninik Janggut Hitam*, and *Ninik Janggut Putih*. These are the dominant spirits during this possession.

Nipah (palm tree leaf) origami dominated most of the construction of the ancestors. A *Nipah* sling was worn on the right shoulder and brought down to the left arm. This intricate *Nipah* sling was woven by folding several *Nipah* leaves together usually by inter-weaving them to produce the geometrical patterns. A slanting downward form in rows of one-by-one centimetre four squares arrangement built the sash. These squares have pleated patterns which emerge from the arrangement of the leaves. The sash was then embellished with a *Nipah* pleated-like ribbon-based flower to signify the important role of the male dancer in a spiritual sermon. He wore a wilted, dried, and lapse strip-off *Nipah* leaves skirt assembled around a circular *waist-ringed Nipah* leaves belt. This was sized accordingly to the dancer's waist. Approximately, fifty lapse *Nipah* leaves would form a well-deserved coverage. This just below-the-knee-length fringe skirt would denote submission and grace of a well-form modest attire. The description of other male dancers' headgear will be described in the following section.

Figure 2 shows the two main spirits summoning figures of the *Mah Meri* tribe. *Ayik Bajus* and his main companion did not go to sea yet danced in a circular motion marked by a cone of *Nipah* leaves monument.

From head to toe, *Ayek Bajus* was ornamented with strings of two *Nipah* leaves that are folded together (**Figure 3**). This is different from the mere lapse *Nipah* leaves worn as a fringe skirt of the initial male dancer. The two bent and creased *Nipah* leaves formed ridged-accordion-like strands which are used to create luses, enormous hair look-alikes, and fringe below knee kilt.

These intricate accordion-like leaves were threaded on a headband. This headband was about an inch high and was adorned with pointy ridges that



Figure 2. *Ayik Bajus* and his main companion.



Figure 3. *Ayek Bajus*.

served as a bridge between the hairline and the cultured wooden mask. Worn proudly by *Ayek Bajus*, the mask was carefully carved of seven wrinkled forehead lines as a symbol of his mighty belonging to the seventh world. According to Mohd Haikal Zuhairi's et al. (2021) report,

“Mortals and humans live on the ‘Sixth World’ also known as *Ti' Enam*. Meanwhile, all *Moyangor* their ancestors, and those good spirits and spiritual beings reside in the ‘Seventh World’ or ‘Overworld’ which is known as *Ti' Tujoh*. Below are the five layers of the Underworld, the realms that are filled with bad spirits and spiritual beings, *hantu* or ghosts, diseases, and poisonous creatures.”

The *Ayek Bajus* mask had thick and exaggerated eyebrows. Along with staring eyes very close together, a nose-like bat, a flat mouth, and an elongated mustache, the mask of *Ayek Bajus* could scare weak-hearted individuals. Yet, it was amusing to watch the dance of *Moyang Pongkol*.

Figure 4 shows how the wooden sophisticated mask of the ancestors can be engineered to be comfortably placed on the head of the spiritual man before the possession session. This fitting is essential for weight distribution management during the spiritual dance.

The companion as seen in **Figure 5** wears a unique kilt. His kilt is made of lapsed *Nipah* yet at the end of each *Nipah* leaf, circular tassels twist at the end of the leaves adorn his fringed skirt. This produced abdomen-wiggling tassels. Each spherical curled tassel was about two inches in diameter. A *Nipah* tuft on his waist was added as an extension of ornamentation to his belly.

Colour is a matter of preference. The dominating yellow-coloured shirt and pants or *Malay* traditional costume were selected by the spirit. A shaman would be told of his colour preferences during a possession session. Thus, changing the colour would be according to the spirit. This yellow-wearing entourage carried handheld tassels and shook them as they danced in a forward movement to the tide. They wore pressed *Nipah* leaves around their waists as shown in **Figure 6**.



Figure 4. *Ayek Bajus* in preparation for the sea spirit summon session.



Figure 5. The companion.



Figure 6. The entourage.

The master of the summon possession also known as *Moyang Bangku* was the head of the sea shaman. He wore a grey shirt and flattened *Nipah* strand around his waist. He was holding a rope that is called *lambai* which is made from *Asam Paya* leaves as shown in **Figure 7**. The significant difference here is his crouch has frails of the yellow horizontal tail ends. Another feature that differentiates him from the entourage is the extension of his headgear. This is further elaborated in the next section.

The *Mah Meri* entourage wore yellow matching headpieces. Headband scarves were folded into a triangular form, to produce “*tanjak*” (*Malay Silat* headgear) look-alike headpiece. In **Figure 8**, the man second from right, wears a neck gaiter or Sahara-type tubular bandana. A wider cylindrical headband is worn by only the head sea shaman (first left). In **Figure 9** below, a man wears a pink hood-style tubular bandana folding the bandana into two resembling the triangular end *Malay* female scarf. This hood scarf may protect him from the scorching sun.

Figure 9 shows the male wearing *Nipah* origami circles. Unlike the one on the right, the left circle has no sharp spiky edges. Its flat edges are alongside inwards pointy triangular which is a result of upwards cutting. Unlike the earlier sling which has four squares, this circle has only three. It is embellished with a *Nipah* ribbon. The architectural ornamentation of the right circle is unreputable. Inwardly curled strands of leaves at the centre surrounding the *Nipah* circle, this ring of *Nipah* headdress looks structured and refined.

Female circles are extravagant. The one on the first left was made of multiple *Nipah* ribbons worn like a foulard bandana as shown in **Figure 10**. Next to it, several interwoven circular downward motion strands of *Nipah* create curly hair worn with a bun. Eight-star rings are attached to these strands like a 360-degree peacock feathered gear. On the second right, a *Nipah* ribbon is worn on the right forehead. The circle may also be attached with several *Nipah* flower ribbons as seen on the far-right picture.

The most obvious features of a female *Mah Meri* attire are the tree bark inner



Figure 7. Head of the sea shaman.



Figure 8. The art of *Mah Meri's Ayek Moyang Laut* possession entourage bandana.



Figure 9. Nipah origami circlet.



Figure 10. Female virgin *Nipah* origami headdresses.

dresses; simple and intricate woven palm leaves skirts; excessively plaited and flower ribboned headdresses, and sash as shown in **Figure 11**. The wood fibre from *Terap* plants that grow nearby, was shaped like clothing. This gave bodily coverage and retained modesty. The diagonal frond weaving created decorative belts for these young females. These belts can be framed or delicately structured crisscrossed woven *Nipah*. As a result, secured yet embroidered belts were formed.

4.3. What Are the Challenges throughout the Process of Organizing the Event?

Based on the researcher’s observation, there were many local people from Judah Village involved during the festival, yet according to A1 who is also known as *Tok Batin*, the event was attended by most of the village people from Judah Village. However, only a small number of people were not attending the festival. This was further elaborated by A2 who was involved during the event as *Ayek Bajus*; according to him, this was one of the reasons for celebrating the event. The event was only celebrated once a year but the preparation of the event took a month before the event. It needs the involvement of all people from the village and support from the government, especially for financing the event.

4.3.1. Time Constraints

Time is seen as an obstacle to preparing for the event as most of the villagers are

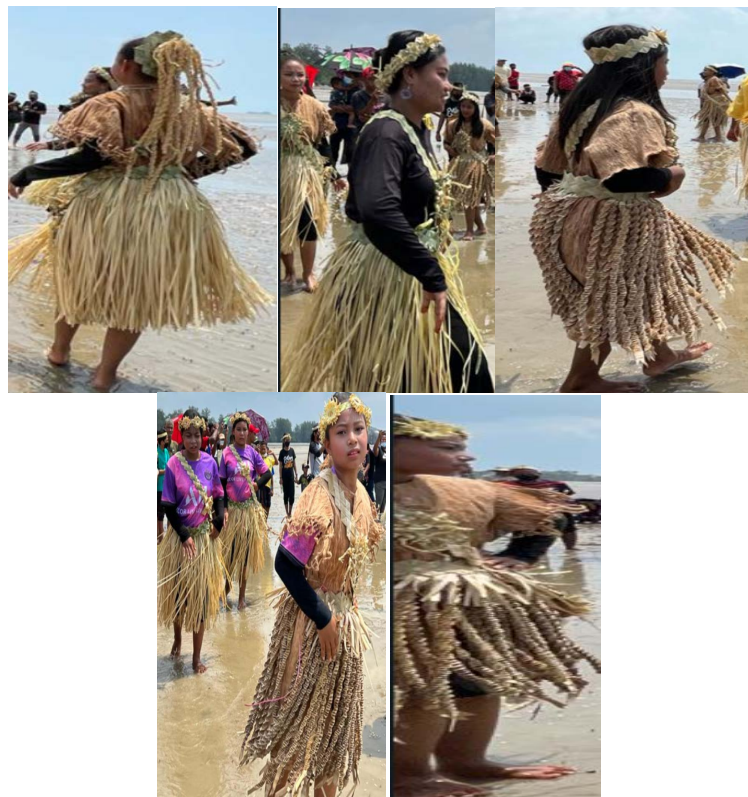


Figure 11. Female entourage attire.

working. The preparation of the event takes about two months in total before, during, and after the event. As the *Mah Meri* tribe must equip themselves with day jobs for survival, this preparation time challenges the perfection that they hope to offer to the spirits.

4.3.2. Financial Requirements

Financing is one of the challenges that needs to be overcome. This challenge in preparation needs to be rectified before the ceremony. The financial requirement is one of the issues for organising the event. However, assistance from all parties such as the Ministry of Tourism, Art, and Culture, *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli*, Malaysia, *Jabatan Kemajuan Seni Negara* (JKKN) (the government agencies) plays an important role in organising the event. Based on the researcher's observation, although these factors become a challenge celebrating this event is a must for them to transfer the knowledge from one generation to another which is important to ensure the sustainability of the culture. The Ministry of Tourism Culture and Art, Tourism Malaysia, and *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli* Malaysia assisted in this event by providing financial support. With constant price hikes, such assistance is highly cherished. Money is needed for the labour of *Nipah* foragers, the purchase of yellow clothing, and *kenduri*. These financial requirements might affect the *Mah Meri* tribe if they cannot attract tourists to the ceremony.

Informants A1, A2, and A3 agreed that the support from the Ministry of Tourism, Art and Culture, *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli*, (JAKOA) Malaysia, *Jabatan Kemajuan Seni Negara* (JKKN) play a big role in ensuring the success of the event. Support from all parties is important to ensure cultural sustainability among the indigenous community. This was agreed by A5 who is one of the officers at JAKOA. The officer highlighted that JAKOA plays an important role in ensuring cultural sustainability among the indigenous community by providing support in terms of financial, training, and other types of support needed by the indigenous community in Malaysia. However, although there are many cultural sustainability activities organised by all parties, the lack of natural resources such as *Asam Paya* leaf, *Nipah* leaf, and *Pulai* wood for making masks are among the challenges for sustaining the cultural event (A1, A2, A3). Apart from this, time constraints for preparing the event due to other commitments such as working is also a challenge for them (A2).

5. Conclusion

The ceremonious *Hari Moyang* is indeed a cultural heritage event that deserves certification and recognition. The documentation of this event must be academically conducted, analysed, and discussed for knowledge and preservation. *Hari Moyang* or ancestral day involves several important stages. There are four detrimental stages as each plays a significant purpose in ensuring such an event is a success. The intricacy of *Nipah* leaves woven into dresses has intimate meaning to the wearer. This is derived from the time spent in each strand and signifies

such high submission and dedication to the ancestor spirits. The attire and adornment not only bring glamour and fame but also serve as evidence of devotion. The staging of this heritage event is not without challenges. Time and financial allocations have been a constant challenge yet with support and assistance, the *Mah Meri* tribe managed to stage such a glorious yearly event. Lastly, systematic documentation of heritage knowledge is important. This should be an academic quest to assist the indigenous community to preserve their events and scientifically analyse them for preservation and revitalization. Further research is required to document other ceremonial events of the *Mah Meri* tribe, or the events organized by other tribes in Malaysia so that these unique practices can be well understood, and actions can be taken to ensure their sustainability.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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