DELAS SANTANO AND HAROLD THWAITES

THE SOUL OF THE MASKS: A JOURNEY THROUGH MAH MERI INDIGENOUS CARVINGS

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INTRODUCTION

As part of their rituals, one of the native tribes of Malaysia, the Mah Meri, carve wooden masks and statues. These masks and statues are used in prayer rituals and ceremonies, and as a way of passing on the culture and heritage of the tribe. The carving of these artefacts was studied to learn about the Mah Meri way of life. With the help of photogrammetry, we digitised the Mah Meri masks and statues and wrote down the stories behind each one. These folktales say a lot about how the Mah Meri treat nature and how much they value it. From this data set, we wanted to see how augmented reality, installations and transmedia storytelling could be used to disseminate and preserve Mah Meri culture and history. We tried to bring the stories that were told to us back to life in a visual format, using the screens on our everyday devices. We turned the oral stories into digital sketches, which were then animated and displayed in an installation. Then, those narratives were changed so that the Mah Meri's stories can be used in augmented reality story books. We want to show and share this multimedia representation of their folklore with the help of the digital container we have placed them in. The initial aim of the research is to immerse the wider public in the culture and heritage of Mah Meri. In disseminating this "research–creation," we also want to see what this multimedia output could give back to the Mah Meri community and help them keep their communal knowledge alive and pass it on to the next generation.

BACKGROUND

The Mah Meri is one of the indigenous tribes of Malaysia. They live relatively close to the urban region of Klang, and it only takes about half an hour to drive to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur from there. The culture and heritage of the Mah Meri people is manifested in tangible objects that are supported by the intangible values of their tribal folklore.

Although the Mah Meri adhere to an animistic belief system, some of them have embraced other religious traditions. On the day designated for honouring the tribal ancestors, which is celebrated once a year, the locals get together to pray for and receive blessings from their shaman.

Figure 1. A Mah Meri family praying the night before ancestor commemoration day.

The presence of spirits in the Mah Meri masks and statue sculptures is an essential component of this animistic belief system. These carvings are meant to illustrate the mythology and beliefs associated with tribal spirits. For instance, the gibbon mask recounts the legend of the spirit gibbon. In this tale, a hunter inadvertently kills a gibbon while out in the forest and, in order to satisfy the spirit, the hunter is required to somehow replace the animal. These objects are carved from wood that is found in tribal settlements and along the rivers where they live. Both hardwoods and soft wood are used for these carvings.

The reality that many carvers are forced to look for work outside their communities in order to support their families is the primary barrier preventing the Mah Meri from passing on their carving skills to future generations. This poses a threat of extinction for the art form. However, the Mah Meri community does receive the benefits of being close to urban centres, providing them with access to employment opportunities as well as educational resources. While Mah Meri people travel into towns for jobs in the factories, as cleaners and janitors, most are still dependent on income earned from fishing and the collection and sale of palm tree fruit for making palm oil.

The community have schools in their villages, and a few years ago the government assisted them in organising a craft workshop so that the Mah Meri could keep producing their traditional masks and statues, despite some people having made the decision to look for work in the cities. Samri, one of the mask carvers, told of a company contracted for cleaning work in Putrajaya where his mother used to work. The company would provide vans to pick the workers up and drive them to Putrajaya, a 40-minute journey.

Figure 2. Soft wood and hardwood mask and statue carving by the Mah Meri.

In this research–creation exploration, we conducted audiovisual interviews with two master carvers in the Mah Meri village in Carey Island, Selangor, Samri and Kemi. We had met Samri and Kemi through previous encounters with museums that hosted events on indigenous arts. These interviews were the first step in collecting stories and other information about their culture. After learning about Mah Meri folklore through their artefacts, we then designed a framework for digitising the masks and statues including the processes involved. These objects are the tangible part of their culture, and their significance and value is compounded by the intangible processes, rituals and beliefs sited in the Mah Meri community.

After interviewing Samri, we commissioned him to make a number of masks and statues and sought his permission to document the whole process from the living tree to the finished product. We also asked him to tell us about the stories associated with the masks and statues that he was making. The carving process was done in stages as we wanted to digitise the artefacts as the work progressed using photogrammetry, enabling us to generate 3D objects from photographing the masks and statues through 360 degrees. We recorded the interviews in order to collect data including the carvers' biographies, the rituals involved, the process of carving and the traditional stories behind the masks and statues. In the research–creation approach, we strongly believe that the collection of such data is a crucial part of the process. The resulting output, whether augmented reality, virtual reality, documentaries or exhibitions, are produced on the basis of the digitised data.

Our interview with Samri and his family revealed that most of the children living in the neighbourhood leave school early, resulting in local people having very few employment opportunities other than manual labour. After further discussion with Samri and his wife, followed by Kemi and his wife, we found that not only did local children lose interest in formal education, but the parents did little to encourage it. However, Samri was doing his best to encourage his two daughters to do well in school and to enrol in higher education programmes so that they could go on to university and eventually achieve a higher standard of living for themselves. In contrast, Kemi, who is Samri's uncle, had asked his eldest son to give up his studies and learn how to sculpt masks and statues for the Mah

Meri community. One of Kemi's daughters studies geriatric physical therapy at university, and she confided to me how her brother had wanted to learn motorcycle mechanics, but had dropped this interest to learn carving, as Kemi had wished.

Samri is a well-known Mah Meri carver, not just in the local community but across the country. His abilities as a sculptor are regularly put on display in national and international exhibitions and workshops by the Ministry of Culture and its affiliated organisations. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, he was able to sell two to three masks per month. The pandemic has reduced the volume of orders even for a carver of his renown, and yet his carving is his sole source of revenue.

During my conversations with these two carvers and their families, everyone agreed that the prospects for this craft are not encouraging. In addition to passing on the skills involved, the Mah Meri want to make sure that the oral histories associated with the statues and masks are also transmitted. They also want to teach the Mah Meri language to their children to keep it alive. Kemi shared how his brother, who has moved to a town, married someone from outside the Mah Meri community and had forgotten how to sculpt. When the two men met up, Kemi's brother would always express is admiration for Kemi's carving and wish that he could be as good. The former's work and life in the city has not allowed him to pursue carving, even as a hobby, as he does not get the time for it. Kemi said that his brother's fingers are "stiff" after so long away from carving.

We have high hopes that our project will inspire the Mah Meri community to embark on a new journey aimed at protecting their heritage and culture by utilising digital media and our inventive approach to storytelling.

THE MASKS AND STATUES

Mah Meri folklore, which includes the oral traditions that have been passed down over centuries through masks and statues, was our entry point into working with the community. The "lore" in folklore refers to the acquisition and expression of cultural knowledge. This term refers to the representation of traditional knowledge in a variety of ways including, but not limited to, tales, proverbs, songs, dances, and customs.[1] Word of mouth is the primary means through which traditional tales are transmitted from one generation to the next. Grandmothers reciting stories to their grandchildren or parents reading bedtime stories to their own children and grandchildren are two examples of this. These tales frequently carry important cultural lessons for the reader or listener. The traditional cultural values that folklore embodies are significant enough to have been included within the scope of UNESCO's definition of intangible heritage.[2]

The threat to this type of intangible legacy, here considered as traditional stories, is becoming more and more real. The media utilised by the the Mah Meri in order to tell and preserve their stories are a unique artistic expression that also serves as a representation of Mah Meri culture. However, the stories themselves can be lost as older generations die out. There is a real risk that the heart and soul of the craft will be lost if the subsequent generations who carry on the work do not acknowledge the importance of stories. In addition, the interest of younger generations in these folktales is dwindling since, as a result of the spread of technology around the world, children everywhere are thirsty for the visual stimulation provided by computer screens. This is a serious barrier to keeping a culture's folktales alive.

For the indigenous Mah Meri people of Malaysia, their folktales are intricately woven into the hand-carved wooden masks that constitute the tribe's unique form of artistic expression.[3] The stories that are carved into the masks come from a wide variety of sources and cover many subjects including nature, animals and ancestors. The *Hari Moyang* and the *Puja Pantai* are two examples of prayer rites that frequently involve the use of these masks.[4]

With the help of Peter Crowe's database of Mah Meri masks, we were able to determine whether a given a statue or mask contained the tribe's own unique story. Peter Crowe has compiled a list of the legends that are associated with each individual carving.[5] We then conducted interviews with carvers to elicit more information about the stories incorporated in the carvings so that we could visualise them for our project.

Peter Crowe's 2016 book, *Spirit Carvings of The Mah Meri of Malaysia*, served as the jumping-off point for collecting Mah Meri traditional legends. After that, we verified the information contained in the book with the carvers themselves. There were a few inconsequential changes, but overall the plot and characters remained the same. During the course of this data gathering exercise, we also discovered various additional types of stories involving a mask. For instance, legends about crocodiles are sometimes represented in masks and statues.

RESEARCH–CREATION

Digital media is a technology that can be used to preserve culture and history, whether tangible or intangible assets.[6] Prior to our project, the Mah Meri Indigenous people of Carey Island, Selangor, and the Iban of Sarawak and their *Pua Kumbu* craft had been the subjects of two separate research projects. The history of both these groups is intimately intertwined with craft practices – for the Mah Meri, the carving of masks and statues, and in the case of Iban women, the weaving of *Pua Kumbu* fabrics.

Since 2014, the lead researcher, Delas Santano, drawing on his professional expertise as an audiovisual producer, has been collaborating with members of the Mah Meri community to help preserve and disseminate their traditional stories and culture to a wider audience. Observing the Mah Meri creating these masks and statues, we took care not to disrupt their cultural rituals of carving and prayer. In order to learn about the folk legends associated with the carvings, we conducted audiovisual interviews with the carvers, as mentioned above. Previous research on the Mah Meri community, as well the community's culture and history, has been thoroughly documented by Roland Werner and Peter Crowe. Our research made extensive use of their work as a starting point for investigation of Mah Meri carving practices and traditions. When we digitised the masks and sculptures, we made sure to capture each stage of the work so that we could use it in our documentation of the carving process. This material will be very useful as learning references for future Mah Meri carvers.

Following the UNESCO convention of 2003, the preservation of cultural traditions has gained increased attention on a global scale. Documenting intangible heritage with the assistance of emerging technologies has proved the most effective method for ensuring its continued existence, as evidenced by the projects listed in a research article by UCL Institute of Archaeology, London.[7] Scholars have argued that archivists should view culture as a resource that can be reproduced and reinterpreted multiple times, as opposed to digitising objects in a static form, as has been the trend in recent years.[8]

Our fieldwork led to the acquisition of a wide variety of data, including audio, audiovisual recordings and three-dimensional measurements. In order to reproduce the artefacts in a three-dimensional format, the Mah Meri carvings were scanned. We began by making observations, and then moved on to recording the carvers at each stage of producing the masks and statues.

As a result of this research, we have gained a clear idea of the central message of each community's narrative, as well as its significance, cultural values, the metaphors and symbols it employs, and its continued survival in today's rapidly interconnecting digital world. The purpose of this study is to record these embodied stories in an innovative and aesthetically pleasing digital format for the sake of the Mah Meri community and its culture in the future. The resulting exhibition was designed with the expectation that visitors from outside the community would be the main audience, with the goal of immersing them in Mah Meri culture and heritage. After completing the exhibition, we found that we could readapt it specifically for the benefit of the Mah Meri community.

After gaining an in-depth understanding of the stories and giving each one a digital production treatment that would appeal to a general exhibition audience, we selected a handful of tales that are unique to each community. We then transcoded them into a visual interpretation.[9] Following the intitial interviews, we consulted Samri and Kemi on the Bahasa script used in the folktales, with a view to having Samri rewrite the texts in the Mah Meri language, which he could then read aloud as narrator of the stories.

A variety of audiovisual storytelling techniques are being considered as a means of preserving these traditional stories. In the long-term strategy envisaged by our research, augmented reality, virtual reality, projection mapping and immersive storytelling are all areas that we intend to investigate. In the original version of the exhibition, a story room was designed to transmit the animatics stories. Within this room, a flat-screen 65-inch monitor was installed to play back the stories. The carver Samri narrates each story in the Mah Meri language in the animatics that we created to accompany the graphics.

In order to produce a visual representation of these folk stories, we produced animatic versions of the six selected stories, illustrated by an artist utilising both digital and analog techniques. Following consultation with the storytellers, we followed the thematic look and feel of the particular culture from which the stories originated to achieve the desired art direction of the illustrations. For instance, in the Mah Meri stories, we made extensive use of earthy tones and textures that resembled tree bark.

Next, computer animation was used to bring the drawings to life, and a narrator told the story while a variety of carefully selected sound effects were used to make the presentation more engaging. In our first version of the "animatics," we had Samri narrating the story in the Mah Meri language, with English and Bahasa Malaysia in the subtitles. In later versions of the folktales, as a three-screen installation and AR book, only English was used, with Bahasa Malaysia and Mah Meri language versions planned for future revisions.

Hoping to create a fully immersive experience for the audience, in addition to exhibiting the stories on a single conventional screen, we also exhibited them in a multi-screen format consisting of three screens. It was decided to construct an augmented reality book in the form of a "comic book," which was given out to guests with the aim of helping Mah Meri to re-experience their

traditional stories, albeit in an unfamiliar medium (see Figures 3 and 4 for examples). One example of this is a single story told in three different formats: an animated short film played on one screen, an animated short film using three screens, and an augmented reality comic book. Each of these formats and media produce a unique storytelling experience for the audience or reader.

In the comic book, the many tales were condensed and presented using text bubbles as in a standard comic book. Augmented reality (AR) was used to stimulate the reader's imagination as Mah Meri visitors read and analyzed the visuals. For instance, where the text reads "thunderstorms swept the village," accompanied by an illustration, the AR delivered the thunderstorms along with appropriate sound effects. The story panels are formatted in a comic-like arrangement that fits on a single sheet of A4 (or two pages of A5 side-by-side). Text boxes were provided to narrate the story in a manner analogous to the narration in the exhibition; however, the text boxes used fewer words. To get a better grasp on the narrative, readers can both read the subtitles and view the images included in each panel. The augmented reality content is only presented in a few of the panels in a given story; these include a short animation and sound effects that, when combined, serve to enhance the storytelling experience. The augmented reality book is not intended to provide a format that is an exact reproduction of the installation; as a result, visitors who viewed the entire animatics in the installation will still have a unique experience with the book.

Figure 3. Augmented reality application for the Mah Meri (mask carving) storybook – two sample pages.
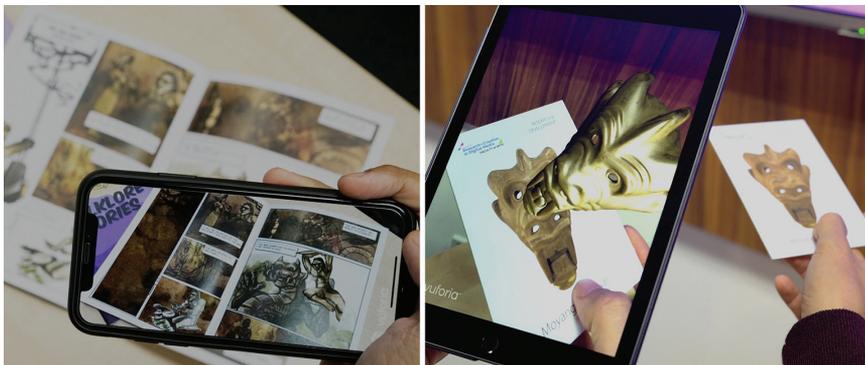

Figure 4. Augmented reality version of a scanned and digitised mask.

DISSEMINATION TO THE WIDER COMMUNITY

The exhibition was designed mainly to introduce Mah Meri culture to other Malaysians from different ethnicities. Having the exhibition at a university gallery, near Kuala Lumpur, made it more accessible for urban residents. At the launch of the exhibition, the Mah Meri community turned out to see the results of all the interview sessions with the community and the cameras moving around the village during ritual prayer sessions. We wanted to share what digital media might contribute to the Mah Meri community in terms of preserving its culture and heritage. We found that we needed to create a new version of the exhibition that could serve the Mah Meri community specifically, preferably being shown in Mah Meri villages.

The development of new digital technologies introduces a new angle into this conversation. These technologies have the potential to increase active, two-way engagement with local history and make it easier for people to access it.[10] The use of digital tools makes it possible to collaborate on the construction of exhibitions, oral histories and other types of display and archives that are based on personal memories, collective recollections and interactive elements.[11]

Our research–creation process resulted in the installation of a transmedia display in a public gallery in 2013 and again in 2017. In 2013, the gallery was set up to showcase works based on digital storytelling, augmented reality, virtual reality 360 and rapid prototyping. As a result, thousands of people unfamiliar with the culture of the Mah Meri were able to gain some insight into it and see some of their artefacts.

Figure 5. Mah Meri children view folklore animatics in the 2013 exhibition at the University's Art Gallery.

Figure 6. Mah Meri families watching the installation video depicting the carving process.

In 2017, part of the "Transmedia" exhibition was set up to highlight the data acquired from the Mah Meri research project, and we created an AR comic book featuring two stories based on two Mah Meri masks and statues. In contrast to a more traditional visual narrative, which is time-based and is typically played back on a television screen, the AR versions were developed to provide users with a unique and novel viewing experience.

Both productions were done in English which, given that most members of the Mah Meri community are fluent in Bahasa Malaysia or their own Mah Meri dialect, was of limited benefit to the Mah Meri community.

It was at this location that we determined that the Mah Meri required their own "culture center." The younger generations, as in every other culture, are having trouble coming to terms with their Mah Meri identity. The use of social media on their mobile devices will only accelerate this process, as most of the content on these platforms uses Bahasa Malaysia or English.

The authors both have previous work experience in the field of museology, which involved the dissemination of information. In this particular case, the use of experimental museology is designed to help museums better deal with the challenges the Mah Meri face when attempting to strike a balance between the educational and entertainment aspects of their work. This is accomplished by aligning the practices followed by museum professionals with interdisciplinary academic discourse. Experimentation is not a novel concept in the field of museology or in the work done by museums, of course. Both fields have always relied on novel approaches to disseminate information in an effort to communicate with large and disparate audiences while simultaneously raising concerns about equality, diversity and rights. Experimentation has allowed museums to generate fresh ideas for exhibits, as well as new methods of communicating with a general audience.[12]

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a significant window of opportunity to investigate the possibility of establishing a permanent museum or gallery for the Mah Meri communities. This would serve as a repository for Mah Meri history and culture, which we could further document and co-create with the Mah Meri people as a means of keeping it alive for future generations. During the course of our fieldwork, we noted that the carvers frequently relied on Mah Meri carvings that were documented in an outdated book that was published in the 1970s. If that volume was to misplaced or damaged, and the carvers had passed away, then younger generations would not be able to continue the craft. In addition, maintaining a consistent income is another issue that needs to be discussed between the communities and the Department of Indigenous Community in Malaysia. Mask and statue carving is hardly viable as the sole source of income for local families, given the unpredictability of tourism numbers and firm orders for carvings. We intend to expand the data that we have digitised and produce a proof-of-concept "museum" that we hope can be set up permanently for the benefit of the Mah Meri communities. We also aim to involve the younger generation in the research project, that we hope to expand into a physical, permanent venue and a digital archive that the Mah Meri can access into the future. The younger generation are the ones that use digital technology in their daily lives and will be the main benefactors of this projected digital hub of Mah Meri culture and heritage.

Delas Santano has been working in creative media for the past 10 years, contributing knowledge from academic, research, and practical aspects. Since 2020 he is a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Research-Creation in Digital Media, School of Arts at Sunway University.

He is also involved in immersive content creation that utilizes augmented reality and VR360. He has been involved in transmedia exhibitions, namely *Mah Meri Unmasked, Textile Tales of Pua Kumbu, The Boatbuilder of Pangkor Island*, and *Transmedia exhibition*. The exhibition utilizes various digital technology that was showcased through various format of application. He has extensive experience in video content production, graphic design, and video editing leading up to aerial drone, VR360, exhibition design, and culture and heritage. In addition, Delas has a great deal of experience in teaching, and research and is now Programme Leader for Master of Arts in Visual Communication and Media Studies in the School of Arts. His main research area is audiovisual production with an emphasis on culture and heritage and video production combined with digital humanities.

Harold Thwaites is Professor and Head of the Centre for Research-Creation in Digital Media (CRCDM) at the School of Arts at Sunway University. Originally from Canada, he was a tenured Associate Professor of the Communication Studies Department at Concordia University in Montreal for 31 years. His research and teaching are in: Communication and Media Studies, Digital Heritage, Experiential Media Arts, Audience/user media impact, Information Design, Biocybernetic Research, Media Production and Digital Humanities. Professor Thwaites sits on the editorial boards of the International Journal of Virtual Reality, the Open Journal of Virtual Reality, and the Journal of Virtual Creativity. At Sunway University his current projects include the international Virtual-Augmented Reality Research Network (VARRN), and the CRCDM Hainan Boatbuilder of Pangkor Island, exploring the digital preservation of Malaysian cultural heritage, and museum experiences for the cultural imaginary. He continues to share his passion to innovate new projects and fields of research, with staff and students in Malaysia.

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