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A Way to Communicate: A New Signage System for the Mah Meri Indigenous Community

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Abstract: Today, designers use a diverse range of alternative media to have a more efficient form of communication. This research is to investigate the potential of traditionally-inspired contemporary communication design to bridge cultural understandings between and among Malaysians of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, I propose to design a new signage system in the Mah Meri indigenous community in Malaysia. This is in view that despite the development of the latest media alternatives in use today, the Mah Meri community still lags behind in terms of utilization of these new communication facilities. This project aims to improve social interactions between this community and visitors. The signage system that I propose will help outsiders to navigate in and around the Mah Meri settlements easier and faster because the system provides relevant information in a simple and easy to understand method. Without this signage system visitors will have difficulty in finding the right directions. This work also endeavours, through the notion of creating a new signage system to enrich the cultural identity of the Mah Meri community based on their beliefs in the elements of nature. This, in turn, will create a niche for the community to promote the uniqueness of their culture and identity to outsiders.

Keywords: Communication, Signage System, Indigenous, Mah Meri

Introduction

Communication is the process of transferring information from a sender to a receiver with the use of a medium in which the communicating information is understood by both sender and receiver. It is a process that allows people to exchange information by various methods. Communication requires that all parties understand a common language that is exchanged. There are auditory means, such as speaking, singing and sometimes tone of voice, and nonverbal, physical means, such as body language, sign language, paralanguage, touch, eye contact, or the use of writing. Communication is defined as a process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create a shared understanding. This process requires a vast repertoire of skills in intrapersonal and interpersonal processing, listening, observing, speaking, questioning, analyzing, and evaluating. Usage of these processes are developed and transferred to all areas of life: home, school, community, work, and beyond. It is through communication that collaboration and cooperation occurs.

Signage is one of the methods that has been used by designers to create better communication. Mollerup (2005, 9) explains that environmental signs work spatially. He states that “the information presented on a sign belongs to and says something about the place of that sign and derives part of its meaning from its location.” At the same time it represents its
identity. Peters (2005, 9) notes that “identity lies at the very core of culture, and it is the key to our understanding of self. Culture encompasses language, traditions, belief, morals, laws, social behavior, and the art of a community.” Understanding culture is, therefore, imperative in avoiding an identity crises and it is also a prerequisite to creating effective identity formation and communication.

As cities grow and mobility increases, thus making the built environment more complex, people’s need for information to better understand and navigate through their surroundings also grows. Thus, there is the need for a proactive, systematically planned; visually unified signage and wayfinding program (Calori 2007, 3). Contemporary signage programs give a singular unified voice to an environment or a site in order to convey a message. Signage also can perform a place-making role by creating a unique identity and sense of place. Its effectiveness can create a brand image in the respective environment. Functioning as wayfinding and placemaking roles, signage can also communicate other kinds of information such as warning, operational, and interpretive information.

The Orang Asli (Indigenous People)

The ‘Orang Aslis’ are indigenous minority groups of Peninsular Malaysia. ‘Orang Asli’ is a Malay term that means ‘original peoples’ or ‘first peoples’. The collective term was first introduced by anthropologists and administrators. The Orang Asli comprises at least eighteen culturally and linguistically distinct groups. In 1999, their population was 105,000 people representing less than 0.5 per cent of the national population. According to the records of the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA), a total of 147,412 Orang Aslis or mere 0.6 per cent of the national population was living in 869 villages in 2004. Most of them are descendants of the Hoabinhians, stone tool-using hunter-gatherers who occupied the peninsular as early as 11,000 B.C.

Humans that were known as Austronesian or Malayo-Polynesia have inhabited the Malay Islands for 5,000 years. They were said to have originated from the south of China (Yunan) and Taiwan. Their migration south occurred sporadically, irregularly and incrementally starting from the Philippines, heading towards the Indonesian islands and into the edge of the mainland Asia, Pacific islands and Madagascar. A majority of the aboriginals in Malaysia (including the Bumiputeras) that inhabit the Indo-Malaya areas today are of the early Austronesian humans.

The Orang Asli (literally original or first peoples) consists of three main groups, namely the Negrito, Senoi and Aboriginal-Malay. The tradition for the presence of these groups was migrational (G. Fix, 12-14). Each group originated elsewhere and immigrated at different times. The foraging Semang (together with other “Oceanic Negritos” such as the Andaman Islanders and various Philippine groups like the Aeta and Agta) represents descendants of a previously widely distributed population now mostly replaced by later migrants which are Senoi peoples and followed by Melayu Asli. Of the 147,412 Orang Asli in the peninsular today, 88.7 per cent live in the interior and forest fringe areas. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Orang Asli communities consider themselves to be a part of the natural environment and link their identity to this same environment.
Mah Meri

Mah Meri denotes ‘Orang Hutan’ (People of the Forest), while in terminological terms, Mah Meri is spoken as ‘bersisik’ or loosely translated ‘scaly’. Rahim (2007) explains ‘mah’ refers to ‘people’ while ‘meri’ means ‘forest,’ thus the words translate as ‘people of the forest’. In the past, this term was used by the Mah Meri when referring to other Orang Aslis. They are said to have originated from the islands in the south of the state of Johor. The Mah Meri group is also known as ‘sea people’ due to the closeness of their settlements to the sea and also because their main source of economy is from the sea. As of late, they have started to enter the farming sectors while also taking part in cultural and handcraft art endeavors that are the identity of this particular group.

The Mah Meri as a people is dwindling in numbers. Out of the 147,412 Orang Asli surveyed by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA) in 2003, the community numbered only 2,896 or about 2 per cent of the total Orang Asli population (Rahim 2007). Although their ancestors used to roam the coastal areas of southern Peninsular Malaysia, they have since settled in the state of Selangor. The community now lives along its southwest coast, within the districts of Kuala Langat and Klang, and on Pulau Carey, which is also close to Kuala Lumpur.

Although Mah Meri is part of the larger Orang Asli community, the people do not speak the same language. They use Bahasa Malaysia, which they learn in government schools, when conversing with other Orang Asli and Malaysians. However, their everyday spoken language is Besisi’. Some of them can also converse in rudimentary English. This community lives in the island now known as Pulau Carey, in reference to Jugraland and Carey Island Co. Ltd. – a Scottish-based company, which established the first coconut plantation there in 1895. There are five main Mah Meri villages on Pulau Carey: Kampung Sungai Bumbon (pronounced “Bumbod”), Kampung Sungai Judah, Kampung Sungai Kurau, Kampung Kepau Laut and Kampung Rambai. In the Besisi’ language, bumbod refers to a hide used when trapping birds. Their linear village is named after Sungai Bumbon, one of several small rivers which flow through the village. The other rivers include Sungai Piuk, Sungai Salang and Sungai Mata. Today this village has many modern amenities including paved road access, 24-hour water and electricity supplies, a primary school, pre-school, multi-purpose hall cum clinic, and several handicraft workshops. Hence they are already dwelling in modernization and more importantly the number of visitors has steadily increased after a bridge was built in 1985 and a sealed access road constructed in the 1990s. This joined the Mah Meri people to Kuala Lumpur.

Research Background

At present not much research has been conducted on art or media communication in the indigenous communities in Malaysia. Furthermore, most previous research focused on traditional lifestyle, socio-economic or infrastructure developments of these communities. This fact can be seen in journals or books that have been published earlier in Malaysia or overseas. In contrast to the Malaysian scenario, developed countries such as United Kingdom, United States of America and Australia are some of the earliest countries to realize the potential of enhancing indigenous arts and culture and, thus, are taking the initiative to promote indigenous arts and culture to the wider world. It is, therefore necessary for the relevant authorities in
Malaysia to take the same initiative in developing media communication as a way of introducing and exposing the Mah Meri community to the world especially with their new neighbor, Kuala Lumpur.

Despite the widespread use of the latest media technology today, the Mah Meri community still lags behind in utilizing any effective method of communication. To develop or to enhance media communication, there should be an initiative to design a new signage system in order to improve social interactions between this community and outside visitors and to keep own identity. Even though the government has developed some infrastructures in their community, the initiative on enhancing media communication still leaves much to be desired. Currently, there is only one piece of signage available in the Mah Meri settlement (fig. 1). According to Calori (2007) the signage and other visual wayfinding clues can help people to navigate in any unfamiliar place or environment. Without signage a sense of place cannot be created such as gateways, portals, gathering points and landmarks. Signage provides information that people actively seek. Therefore, good signage builds good relations with any audience. With reference to the above, the researcher intends to design a new signage system in order to promote the cultural identity of this community to its neighbor in Kuala Lumpur and links to the outside world.

Figure1: Signage at Kampung Sungai Bumbun

Research Influence

This research began with meeting and brainstorming with supervisors, initial comments, suggestions and decisions with regard to this project. At the first stage I researched the
background and historical information concerning the Mah Meri community. Following more in-depth research I made an interesting discovery in relation to art works in this community.

I conducted a pilot study in Malaysia in June 2009, which included a discussion with Mr. William Harald Wong, a well-known figure in communication design industry. He also provided information relevant to this research. I also saw Carey Island first hand when on an organized field trip to the Mah Meri settlement. On this trip a meeting with batin (community leader) also took place in order to elicit more information regarding the history and lifestyle of the community. I noticed that wood carvings and other handicrafts of the Mah Meri are products based on the natural elements around them and are also based on their beliefs. This is especially so in the production of pandanus and pandan types of leaves woven as an art craft. In wood carving, all creations are based on the community’s collective imagination and dreams and normally depict the struggle between good and evil forces as part of the natural world. Some photo images were captured for future references.

During this process I was inspired by the artwork of masks and sculptures (fig. 2) and the craft weaving (fig. 3). The craft weaving is practiced by Tompoq Topoh’s group, the Mah Meri female project members who produced the first woven products that were established in 2005. Meanwhile masks and sculptures were only produced by menfolk in this community. ‘Tompoq’ translates as ‘the start of a weave’ while ‘topoh’ is an ‘interlocking mat pattern’. 

Figure 2: Masks and Sculptures
At the earlier stage of my research, I read and observed images from different books and websites in order to create suitable signage models related to the Mah Meri artwork. In the information gathering process there are several artists who influenced me in the conceptualization of a new signage system such as Per Mollerup, Brodsky and Utkin, Renzo Piano and Constantin Brancusi.

In the artwork of Intergral Reudi Baur (fig. 4), signs exist for the purpose of communicating information to people about their environment. “The signage shows the way. It explains what happens along the way, and it is itself a collection of informative sculptures” (Mollerup 2005, 299). I realized that this work is both signage and sculpture, which influencing the conception of my preliminary design. I wished to continue this aesthetic in my own work but with a different conceptual trajectory and forms.
In Brodsky and Utkin’s work (fig. 5), I gazed into their notion of emphasizing the captivated subjects with different direction and layout, which leads into mapping with the inclusion of imagery. It can be seen in each segment of their artwork within each image that united strong forms. Nesbitt (2003) states that Brodsky and Utkin’s work owes as much to literary as to visual sources. Their designs refer to the whole of architectural history and are conspicuously populated with western icons and images. Since the early eighties they have worked almost exclusively with etchings. Texts also play an important role in their etching in order to explain or identify images. Due to the above explanations, and especially the technique, subjects and style in their artwork (Contemporary Architectural Art Museum, Tokyo: Japan 1988), I was impressed and inspired to do my own mapping and translate the above into my own style.
Meanwhile looking for structures that included natural and cultural sensitivity I researched Renzo Piano’s architecture, Jean – Marie Tjibaou Cultural Center (fig. 6). I observed that this architecture has its uniqueness in terms of materiality, environment and cultural belonging. To materialize this project, Renzo Piano faced the challenges of building a cultural center dedicated to the Kanak civilization whereby he had to sustain a cultural heritage and at the same time had to add a modern concept into the building. The technologically-oriented lightness of the structure permits Renzo Piano to use trees or traditional local huts as his source of inspiration. Despite his emphasis on local culture, he also blends the use of wood and natural ventilation and aluminum elements to suit the environment. Making maximum use of natural ventilation, he ventured into the area of sustainable architecture. His subtle references are never so literal as to become obvious (Jodido 2008, 9-273).

This concept has many variants, but there is an implied respect for nature that he does not reject. His ability to adapt his designs to their locations while maintaining a constant interest in materials and appropriate technology has inspired me to apply the same concept.
But I was not making architecture; rather I wished to develop design for sculptural signage. One of the first problems encountered was the base of my models. Then I looked to Brancusi, as a sculptor that had created bases that suitably worked with the sculpture. In Brancusi’s work “Bird” (fig. 7), I observed the way he created the base and form of his sculpture. This symbolically enriches its meaning, establishing a vertical axis that provides an organic connection with the earth. In this work, he captured a form that implies flight (1910) and he continued to elaborate on this theme into the 1940s. Another powerfully original aspect of Brancusi’s work is the subtly tactile treatment of surface to an aesthetic category that calls attention to the material as something fragile, which is different from its mere plasticity or ductility (Gimenez and Gale 2004, 16-29). Furthermore I was also interested in his choice of material since it has a strong relationship in each structure and form.

What is interesting in Brancusi’s work is that he reinvented the base, converting it into an essential, integral part of the sculpture. His achievement lies in an ability to balance the demands of innovation and memory in order to achieve an epic beauty. “Brancusi organized his shapes according to similarity, setting or contrast, first applying the notion to his studio, where he distinguished between wood, marble and stone, plaster and metal, roughness and smoothness, curves and straight lines, solid objects and empty space, the small and the monumental, vertically and horizontally—all the components of a living, richly complex creative space” (Cabenne 2002, 123). I consider his works to be full of simplicity and yet show various messages and exploration.
Research Process

During this process, I began with sketches and then transferred these drawings onto the computer. To discover some potential concepts, I developed various models with different shapes, patterns, and colors. In doing so, I created two dissimilar styles of signage related to wood art (fig. 8) and craft weaving (fig. 9, 10) respectively. Based on the preliminary sketches of this project, I created a model or mock-up. From discussion, I determined that pandanus (types of leaves) craft (fig. 3) is the most intriguing subject, compared to wood art.
I produced various designs of this model in order to stimulate more ideas. I used paperboard and drawing paper as material, as seen below on the model (fig. 11, 12, 13), representing craft weaving. Based on this experience and knowledge, I developed several series of signage that represented the meaning/narrative of the knot technique that I had applied into my artwork. Essentially craft weaving was a major part of the Mah Meri cultural identity. Hence the craft was also an important aspect in their customary laws and animistic beliefs. The new understanding enable me to construct several symbolical significances of the artwork. Most of the shapes were based on geometry (fig. 11) and weave techniques (fig. 12).
In order to achieve a more satisfactory outcome, I formed a lot of different models. I started to look in depth at the potential of this artwork to make sure it suited the environment and culture of the Mah Meri community. With this intention, I started to focus on the notion of
the artwork through creating a model with variable heights, shapes, colors, messages and fonts. I explored and observed a few places that had attractive signage in order to enhance my creativity and captured images (fig. 14) as reference and used all the sources, mixing the modern and traditional art into the signage. Each sign has a different shape, font and color that I will consider when producing my own signage.

![Signage in Melbourne](image1)

Figure 14: Signage in Melbourne

After recording all the data, I shaped a new model and tried a few approaches by maintaining the elevation of the entire model. However, I did make some changes in terms of colors and messages and used different knot techniques. The models (fig. 15) did not work efficiently for the audience to examine the message since the height was too low. As a result, I had to develop a new signage of the appropriate height in order to make it effective for the audience to comprehend its message. As a step further, I explored a new approach and made more experimental models. The intention of the experiment was to find the basic criteria of how to produce effective signage through researching font size, height and the message layout.
During this initial investigation I realized that more visual information was desirable for this signage about Mah Meri people. In order to justify and visualize the Mah Meri culture, I constructed a map influenced by Brodsky and Utkin. As a result of this investigation, several questions arose regarding what was fascinating about this place and the community. Once I was satisfied with the result, the process began by drawing a map and creating a new model, influenced by the experimentation. The main inspiration in developing this mapping arose from many potential sources that exist in this community. I delivered the idea by drawing a map and divided the map (fig. 16) into different categories that represented the chronology of the Mah Meri community. The categories are as follows:

1. The location - Pulau Carey located at the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Before the construction of the bridge at Pulau Carey (Carey Island), this community had to use a private ferry service or small boat to cross Sungai Langat ‘Langat River’.
2. The architecture – the houses are in three different types. They are traditional small houses, modified large houses and new houses provided by the government.
3. Tompoq Topoq’s project - this project was established in 2005 with weaving as the main economic activity done by Mah Meri women to supplement their families’ income.
4. Death and burial – the body is cleaned and covered with rice and lime, pandan leaf is squeezed to give a good odor. The corpse is wrapped with white cloth and placed in a wooden coffin.
5. Main Jo’oh dancers - Main jo-oh is a traditional mask dance to invite the muyang ‘ancestor’ to join in celebration. It is performed during Ari’ Muyang, weddings and other joyous occasions.
6. The annual day of spirits - ‘shaman’ based on the lunar cycle determines the date of celebration. Ari’ Muyang ‘ancestor’s day’ is the biggest annual celebration.

7. Masks and sculptures - it is only practiced by men folk in Kampung Sungai Bumbun and used by Main Jo’oh dancers in Ari Muyang celebration.

Figure 16: 1st Mapping Exercise

This process took several steps further by designing various maps (fig. 17, 18) in order to locate what was appealing about this settlement. I began to arrange the layout and started to choose the most important images representing the uniqueness of the Mah Meri community. In the final map drawing (fig. 19) I interpreted all the subjects in the map that are categorized above except masks and sculptures. It has generated ideas on what suitable messages and forms are to be implemented on the signage.
Figure 17: 2nd Mapping exercise

Figure 18: 3rd Mapping Exercise

Figure 19: Final mapping exercise
As it turned out, the result was quite captivating and persuaded me to come up with another model (fig. 20). Fortunately I was able to produce a model of ideal height (fig. 21) with varieties of knot technique, based upon information gathered from previous explorations and investigations. To make the artwork compatible with the natural environment I applied different colors to an example of each signage study.

Figure 20

Figure 21

In creating these models (fig. 20, 21) I used two different languages; Malay and English. The main purpose is to let the audience grasp and be able to read the message easily. The message will also be set in a 360-degree rotation. Positively, the activity of walking around the signage will invite audience involvement with the environment alongside the signage. As a step further, derived from previous exercises and questions, I created a model (fig. 22) of the Mah Meri settlement. In this process I created a Mah Meris’ real model settlement in order to experience a real condition and location of the new signage system as a feasibility study. This initial research has become the main motivating factor in completing this project. In initial exploratory research I gained experience and knowledge regarding the history, stories and memories of the Mah Meri community.
Conclusion

The research result aims at producing a new signage system particularly to vigilant designers, Mah Meri future generation, students and researchers into the culture, identity and beliefs of the Mah Meri community. Through practice-based research, the insertion of this signage system will contribute new knowledge concerning the Mah Meri community to the Malaysian people as well as to the world. The process will provide a new understanding and provide a new set of information for inventing signage systems. This, in turn, will create a niche for the community to promote the uniqueness of their culture and nature to outsiders. Hence, the new signage system can become a new landmark in the Mah Meri settlement. In order to improve more satisfactory outcomes, further work in this research will involve designing a 3D virtual environment to test the effectiveness of this signage. Further investigation and experiment will take place in searching for the finest material for creating a new signage system that is appropriate with the environment and weather in the Mah Meri settlement. I intend to test my signage out when I visit the Mah Meri settlement in the middle of 2011.
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About the Authors

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Hisham is a senior lecturer at the Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia and currently a PhD candidate in Art & Design at Monash University, Australia. Hisham graduated from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, United States, in 2002 with an MFA in Advertising Design and received a BA in Graphic Design from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia in 1993. He worked in the design industry for several years before beginning a teaching career. He has participated in numerous exhibitions and won many awards at national and international level. Hisham also a member of ICOGRADA (The International Council of Graphic Design Associations). As a researcher and designer, Hisham is now looking for a highly creative new environment where he can continue to grow, discover new challenges and share his creative knowledge and experience. Most importantly, he hopes to gain new notions of creativity in order to be a good educator and designer.

Dr. Jennifer Butler
Jennifer is a coordinator 1st year Interdisciplinary Design Studio, coordinator of Master of Design (coursework) and during 2010 acting coordinator for Bachelor of Interior Architecture. Jennifer also lecturers within these programmes at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. In 2008 she obtained a PhD Structural Thinking: Thinking Structure, Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University and 1967 BA Fine Arts (1st Class Hons) Sculpture with Drawing, Ravensbourne College of Art & Design, UK. Her works has been exhibited locally and overseas. For more information about Jennifer please visit her website www.jenbutler.com.au.

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Members of the Design Community meet at the International Conference on Design Principles and Practices, held annually in different locations around the world. The Design Conference was held at Imperial College London, in 2007; in conjunction with the University of Miami, Florida, USA in 2008; at Technical University Berlin, Germany in 2009; at the University of Illinois at Chicago, USA in 2010; and at Sapienza University of Rome, Italy in 2011. In 2012, the conference will be held at the University of California, Los Angeles, USA.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. Intellectually, our interests span the breadth of the field of design. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging scholars and practitioners. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can either submit a video and/or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

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The third major publishing medium is our news blog, constantly publishing short news updates from the Design Community, as well as major developments in the field of design. You can also join this conversation at Facebook and Twitter or subscribe to our email Newsletter.
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