

03/12/2003

## World of the Orang Asli

Sarah Sabaratnam

ORANG Asli And Their Wood Art, a book by Datuk Anthony Ratos, provides a rare glimpse into the culture, arts and customs of the Orang Asli - a part of history and a part of the first inhabitants of Malaysia of whom little is known.

Through eyewitness accounts and a large body of facts, Ratos takes the reader on a safari into the forest interior and into the lives of the Orang Asli. The breathtaking photographs are taken by H. Berbar.

Little has been written about the everyday lives of the Orang Asli, the things that matter to them, the tools they use to survive, their habits and practices.

We venture only rarely into their world - and this is the gap that Ratos fills through his book.

As he takes us on a journey through the forests and into the settlements, paying attention to the different things the Orang Asli need to do to survive, our respect for them grows.

They have to hunt for their food almost daily. They survive on very little. But it is peaceful here, and even Orang Asli who have been exposed to the modern world seem to prefer the lifestyle of the jungle.

Ratos mentions a couple of Orang Asli he is acquainted with, who, despite growing up in the city from a young age, returned to the the jungle after their studies and a few years of working.

Till today, some Orang Asli live nomadic lives. Others are semi-nomadic, and some fully agricultural.

They depend on the forest for their every need - from medicines to food - and Ratos shows us how this happens through pictures, illustrations and words.

He explains the multitude of uses found for the bamboo plant: "Bamboo is used in the home as utensils or receptacles for water, for baking food, in the construction of houses, for making fish and animal traps, as spears and as blowpipes to hunt birds and animals. In their spare time, the Orang Asli fashion the bamboo into decorative combs, quivers and musical instruments. After the birth of a child, a section of bamboo is used as a knife to cut the umbilical cord."

The book is divided into four chapters, with three appendices. It includes a message from former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who pays homage to Ratos' work and his tireless activism for Orang Asli art.

The author has been involved with the indigenous community for the past 60 years. In his introduction, he introduces the Orang Asli, giving enough details to enlighten a foreigner but not too much to bore those already familiar with these people.

Chapter One: Who Are the Orang Asli? delves into history, tribes, physical attributes, and how these indigenous people are faring.

Chapter Two: Life in the Jungle describes a typical day and what they normally eat: "Yam, fruit and roots are wrapped in strips of banana leaves, and baked in hot ashes."

As in cultures the world over, "... the women and girls of all tribes serve the menfolk first before they serve themselves."

There are also anecdotes about encounters with wild animals. Of particular interest is one describing a duel between a leopard and a wild boar that eventually led to both their deaths.

This chapter also sheds some light on the habitat of the Orang Asli,

their dress and personal ornaments, and their language. There is also an entire section dedicated to their hunting practices.

Here we learn that the Orang Asli take only what they need from the forest. They do not hunt tigers, crocodiles and elephants which are considered sacred.

Big mammals are not hunted either, as the Orang Asli do not waste - they only go after small animals which are sufficient to feed their family.

"Hunters keep two to three darts in their hair for immediate use, quick loading and rapid firing," writes Ratos, explaining a common method of hunting among the Orang Asli using a blowpipe.

In this chapter, we also learn that the Orang Asli played a part in the development of the country, having been hired as construction workers on railway lines and as lumberjacks by the Chinese.

The present state of their health and education is also discussed here.

In the third chapter, Ratos unveils the mystery behind their religion, customs and beliefs. Common practices in marriage, divorce and sex present an interesting read, if not a few raised eyebrows.

In Chapter Four: Art and Form, the book finally expounds on the wood art of the Orang Asli.

Ratos writes about the musical instruments, structures, sculptures and their significance to the Orang Asli. How they carve, what they fashion figures from, what they mean and why, are all explained here.

The book's title is misleading. Its contents are not confined to wood art - indeed, it manages to capture the lifestyle of the Orang Asli in one fell swoop.

Its large typeface and navigable sections make the book easy to read. Orang Asli And Their Wood Art is a worthy coffee-table book. The only setback is that the pictures are not captioned, leaving readers to play a guessing game.

We read often of the plight of the Orang Asli, of their displacement and poverty. Despite being aboriginal, they remain marginalised. Today, they are one of the poorest communities in the country. Unfortunately for us, we are exposed to them only when they move into our world.

More than anything, this book helps Malaysians gain a better understanding of the first inhabitants of this multicultural country. In that it succeeds.

\* 'Orang Asli and Their Wood Art' is published by Times Editions. For more information, call Norhaniza Nordin at 03-2296-6551.

\* The writer can be contacted at sarah\_s@nstp.com.my