

# A Celebration of Orang Asli Culture and Traditions

August 4th was a proud day for 23-year-old Semai author, Bah Saluji Yeok So Alu. His illustrated children's book, *Nenek Dengan Yeok Luat*, was launched by the Raja Muda of Selangor, Tengku Amir Shah Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah, at the Selangor International Indigenous Arts Festival 2018.

A self-taught artist, Saluji hopes to preserve the Semai's rich traditions by using his art to highlight challenges faced by indigenous tribes in a developing Malaysia. These include the loss of traditional lands and natural resources to land developers.

His book describes the adventures of the 9-year-old Semai boy Yeok Luat and his dog, Cooq Leek. These tales were traditionally told by Semai storytellers under the moonlight. Now they have been brought to life by Saluji's vibrant watercolour artwork, based

on his tribe's rich oral history and his experiences foraging in the forest of the Peninsula's Main Range with his father.

The book was written in two languages, Chinese and Bahasa Malaysia. The young artist already has plans for a second book. He hopes to illustrate more traditional stories from his tribe and educate others on the importance of their land for his community to survive.

The two-day festival at the Shah Alam National Botanical Park in Selangor showcased the arts of indigenous people from Malaysia, ASEAN and from as far away as Iran. Visitors celebrated the unique cultures of the local Mah Meri, Semai, Temuan and Jakun tribes and tried their food cooked the traditional way. There was Semai storytelling of the kind Saluji listened to as a boy, and a performance of the Semai traditional dance, *sewang*.

At the Borneo street market, visitors could buy handicraft made from wicker, beadwork or wood carvings, jewellery and trinkets, *tuak* (palm wine), local fruits and other foods, and souvenirs. At the festival, the biggest replica of a *kerchang*, a type of traditional puzzle that is found in indigenous cultures across Malaysia, also made it into the *Malaysia Book of Records*.

The Koperasi Sengoi Pribumi Perak Cooperative was there to help the Orang Asli to boost their income through the sale of various items from food to crafts. (The Cooperative also provides training in managing their finances.) The beautiful handwoven baskets, pouches and other crafts were popular and within the first day, most of the fruits like mangosteens and petai were also sold out, as these were some of the visitors' favourite fruits. Books written by the Orang Asli were also sold, to encourage more indigenous authors.



Wak Masnah Akop shared Bah Saluji's book with children and adults



Semai Orang Asli from Perak showcased their storytelling, dances, food and crafts.

Seeing all these tribes coming together to showcase their culture and to be acknowledged for their uniqueness certainly made it a memorable day for the Orang Asli. Support from the public, through their presence and their purchase of items, will encourage them to make more crafts in the future.

It brought so much joy to the Orang Asli and the indigenous groups from other parts of Asia to share their knowledge, culture, handicraft and experiences with the large audiences, who were eager to experience and learn about their heritage.

Everyone who sat through the performances, learned and conversed with the indigenous people was

indeed touched. If they came knowing little about the Orang Asli, when they returned home, they could share what they had heard and seen. It is through these experiences that everyone can look out for one another and be the voice for the ones who are voiceless.

As we listen to their stories, we can share ours too and we can grow together by building each other up with love, wisdom, deeper understanding and respect for one's differences. We should be proud of the Orang Asli's hard work, dedication and passion, and acknowledge them for who they are. As Malaysians, we can do greater things for our country when we stand together as one. We can make an impact as we stand side by side, holding on to our faith and belief. ■



The Raja Muda of Selangor, Tengku Amir Shah, launched Bah Saluji's book at the Selangor International Indigenous Arts Festival

Wak Mayna Akop, a Semai Orang Asli who works in events management, was the official photographer and chronicler for Malaysian Care's participation in the Selangor International Indigenous Arts Festival 2018.