

Be the voice of the voiceless Orang Seletar

By Yvonne Young Ai Peng



“Lot, Umah Am” translated as “The Sea, My Home”. One of the films from Freedom Film Fest 2011. This 20 minutes documentary was made by Liaw Pey Wen. It gave us a peek into the lesser known lives of the indigenous Orang Seletar (Sea Gypsies) who have for generations called the Straits of Johore their home. After I have watched it, I became interested in the plight of the Orang Seletar.

One sunny afternoon, I paid a visit to Kampung Sungai Temon near Taman Perling. The village is well known for its seafood restaurants. I met Edi and his mother (picture) who explained to me the origin of the Orang Seletar. A Seletar Cultural Centre was built by the villagers to preserve their culture and to educate the public. They proudly guided me around the centre. The Orang Seletar has a legend not unlike the Noah’s Ark from the Bible. According to Edi’s mother, prior to the Second World War, the rain fell in torrents for 40 days and nights in Johore. The water level rose to the foot of Gunung Pulai. To counter the strong currents, the Orang Seletar tied their houseboats together. Unfortunately, the rope broke. Some of them were carried away by the currents and were lost.

The Orang Seletar have been generally integrated into the Malay community to such an extent that they are in danger of being forgotten of the central role they played in early Malaysian history. Those who have retained their old nomadic lifestyle prefer to live by the sea and remain one of the poorest minority groups of Asia. They are experts in harvesting the produce of the sea, shore and mangroves for their own consumption and for the market. Presently, they strive to survive through harvesting fish, rearing mussels, trapping prawns and crabs in the waters along the Straits of Johore.¹

The sea, however, has become polluted and their food sources are deteriorating. Many are forced to look for employments at nearby restaurants and factories. The Orang Seletar are nomads, now for a different reason - they are forced to move from their customary lands whenever there is government acquisition of lands. In some areas, developments have caused much anxiety and frustration among the affected villagers while they hope to get fair and adequate compensation to build their new communities.

Losing their customary lands and homes, the Orang Seletar are also losing their indigenous identity and livelihood. Their culture, tradition and custom are related to the sea and the mangroves.

How are we related to the Orang Seletar? They are the experts of the sea and mangrove. We need their invaluable knowledge of protecting the environment and ultimately protecting our survival.² Losing the Orang Seletar culture means losing the knowledge of environment protection. Hence, preserving the Orang Seletar customary lands and their traditional culture means preserving our own survival against pollution and global warming. As the Orang Seletar are the indigenous people, it is our duty to preserve their cultural heritage as part of our own heritage.

Defending the Orang Seletar customary land rights is about justice. Lawyers are called to uphold the cause of



justice without fear or favour. The Orang Seletar have major disadvantage, lack of knowledge as to their rights. They need to be educated as to their rights as Orang Asal or Pribumi.

A Seminar on the rights of Orang Asli (entitled "Rights Denied") was conducted on 19th November 2011 and the "Bar Council Orang Asli Defence Fund" was launched. The Bar Council Committee on Orang Asli Rights is calling more lawyers to volunteer to educate the Orang Asli as to their rights and to take up cases defending the Orang Asli rights on pro bono basis. The fund will be used to facilitate investigations, the filing fees & disbursements. It is about respecting human beings, recognising the concept of equality and upholding dignity. The Orang Asli are the most marginalised community.³ Let us do our part, be the voice of the voiceless.⁴ Of those closest to us, the Orang Seletar.

Endnotes:

¹ Extracted from <http://www.joshuaproject.net/people-profile.php?peo3=14209&rog3=SN>

² Extracted from the "Handling Pro Bono Orang Asli Claims: Why Should You Volunteer?" by Jessica Binwani at the Seminar on the rights of Orang Asli (entitled "Rights Denied") on 19th November 2011 at Raja Aziz Addruse Auditorium, Bar Council.

³ Extracted from the Opening Address by Dato' Ambiga Sreenevasan at the Seminar on the rights of Orang Asli (entitled "Rights Denied").

⁴ Extracted from the "Handling Pro Bono Orang Asli Claims: Why Should You Volunteer?" by Steven Thiru at the Seminar on the rights of Orang Asli (entitled "Rights Denied").



Johore Bar Committee 2011/2012



From left (behind): R. Jayabalan, Ms. Yvonne Young Ai Peng, Kuna Nadasen, Ms. P. Sintahara Jotfi, Ms. L. Sujata a/p M.P. Lakshmanan, Syed Ismail Bin Syed Omar

From left (front): K. Mohan, Puan Norhayati Binti Mohamed, S. Gunasegaran, Puan Shahareen Begum Binti Abdul Subhan, Tho Kam Chew

Not in the picture: Andrew Wong Fook Hin and Puan Mazni Binti Mohamad Ikhtwan