

Indigenous Art and the Biodiversity Crisis

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ABSTRACT—Indigenous people and local communities play a vital role in the protection of land to foster biodiversity. Peatland is especially important for storage of carbon. Malaysia has a large area of peatland, including areas which are the traditional lands of the Orang Asli indigenous people. These lands are under threat from the development of highways, dams, ports, and plantations. As an artist, the author focuses on the fight of indigenous peoples to protect the land, their identity, and their way of life. Protecting indigenous land rights is a critical environmental strategy, a bottom-up approach to climate mitigation.

Indigenous people and local communities have been the stewards of the land for thousands of years. Their active engagement is essential in preventing and reversing degradation of forest and peatland. In 2021, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) published a report on *The State of Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' Lands and Territories*. Based on a careful global survey, the IUCN found that 91 percent of lands controlled by indigenous peoples and local communities are in good or moderate ecological condition. These lands cover 17.5 percent of the world's terrestrial surface. The Report noted: "Many of these areas are potentially important biocultural landscapes that achieve conservation and climate-resilient outcomes while also advancing Indigenous Peoples' rights, and preserving cultural, spiritual and other values." The Report's main finding was as follows:

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) are vital custodians of the world's remaining natural landscapes. As such, achieving the ambitious goals and targets in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework will not be possible without the lands and territories recognised, sustained, protected and restored by IPLCs. (IUCN 2021: 7)

Peatlands and the *Orang Asli* of Malaysia

Among these lands, some of the most important are peatland because they store so much carbon. In Malaysia there are around 2.6 million hectares of peatland.

Peatlands have formed over thousands of years and have always been important to indigenous communities. They store more carbon than any other type of ecosystem. Globally more carbon is locked up in peatlands than all the forests of the world. Damaged

peatlands are a major source of greenhouse emissions, responsible at present for about 5 percent of human-linked emissions.

The indigenous people of Malaysia are known as the *Orang Asli*. We are the poorest and most vulnerable people in Malaysia with poor health care and education levels. We harvest natural resources such as bamboo, rattan, herbal medicines, and wild game from ancestral lands in the forests. Like many other indigenous peoples across the world, we depend on the immediate environment for our living, predominantly from ancient forests and peatlands. Our ancient culture views nature as part of an extended, ecological family that shares our ancestry and origins. We believe that any living thing on earth has a spirit.



Figure 1. The author's father.

I belong to the Temuan people, one of the largest groups of the *Orang Asli* who live in the western part of Peninsular Malaysia. My home village is in a peatland area near Kuala Lumpur. The plants from the peat forest are used in my community for medicine and for building materials. The peatland also provides water supply to the villages for crops. These peatlands are under threat from mixed development proposals.

My mother and father are both master weavers in my village, especially making fish traps and pandanus mats. Both of my parents have a deep understanding of nature and people. My father told me that nature comes first, before us, the humans.

Art and the struggle of indigenous peoples

I have become an artist. In a rapidly modernizing Malaysian state, In my paintings, there are many images of deforestation, overdevelopment, and consumerism. I'm always trying to capture the tension and pressure faced by my people, whose lives interact with and respect the natural environment. My work emphasizes the inequalities that exist

between modern consumerism and traditional sustainable ways of life. My paintings are a reflection of my people and the rain forest in which I grew up, and to show the importance of nature to the *Orang Asal* indigenous people. The presentation of artwork also captures a contemporary view of the struggle faced by Malaysia's indigenous people and the aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of multiracial Malaysia.



Figure 2. "At the Crossroads"; diptych, acrylic on canvas, 2018

All the inspiration for my work comes from my village, my background and especially the indigenous people. The indigenous people in Peninsular Malaysia now have to deal with the effects of modernization, with development projects that encroach on indigenous land. Many of these projects encourage the building of new roads and highways. This building development is like a virus that keeps on growing and spreading. Many people think that in order to go to work, they need a car and a road. Therefore there are more cars and they have to build more roads. When there are more roads, more people buy cars. It's an infinite circle.



Figure 3. “Stop Telom Dam”; acrylic on canvas, 2015

Dams are needed to generate electricity and to supply water to the population. But the land used for these dams is where the indigenous people live, which is not fair. They are the people who are flooded out, who must move away from their traditional land to make way for these projects. They are the ones who suffer a hard time. This has an impact on culture, on lifestyle, and on health. But in the case of this Telom Dam, planned near the Cameron Highlands, we managed to have the project stopped in 2019.



Figure 4. The author with a painting about Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve, 2020

Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve is a peatland swamp gazetted as forest since 1927. In February 2020 Selangor State Government proposed to degazette 97 percent of the area for a mixed development project. Despite protests, it went ahead with the plan. After big protests, the government had to cancel the project in September 2020.

As an artist I always want to reflect what happens in my village, and at the same time I want to preserve and practice the culture of the indigenous people. Many people in my village are master weavers who use the pandanus plant from the peatland forest to weave into mats.

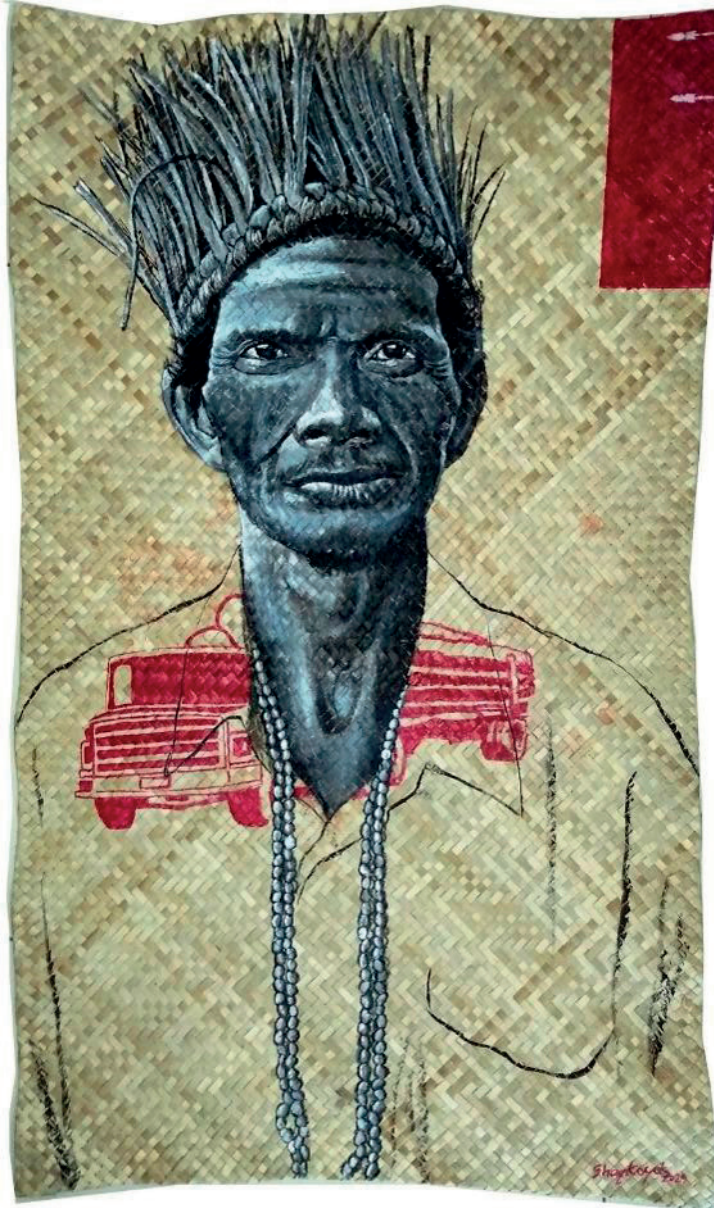


Figure 5. "Cold Stare"; acrylic and charcoal on pandanus

Logging is still a big problem, especially in the undeveloped parts of the state of Malaysia. Many indigenous people have to fight to stop logging activities with road blockades and even human blockades. Logging not only destroys the road and ancestral land of indigenous peoples but creates pollution in the rivers and the habitat of wildlife.

I use mats as canvas for paintings for personal reasons. I grew up in a hut, living a very traditional indigenous lifestyle. I still remember that my mother wove a big mat for me and my six siblings to sleep on. If somebody snores, everybody hears. If somebody farts, everybody smells. That is the beauty of living the *Orang Asli* life.



Figure 6. "Malok Hak Kannik" (Where Are Our Right?); acrylic and charcoal on pandanus, 2019

Titi Aban Anjang, or grandfather Aban, is a Temiar person from the rural east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. He is a cultural activist who has long been fighting for the rights and the land of the Temiar people who live right inside the forest, where there are problems over logging. I used a pandanus woven mat from the village for the canvas for his portrait. He is ninety years old, but he still goes out on the street to protest even though the protest is far from his home.



Figure 7. "The Witnesses"; installation art, 2019

I also do installations, using local articles like traditional woven mats made by the indigenous women. Many of the woven articles are made of pandanus leaves. In this installation, there is the stump of a tree cut down by a logging company. I want people to experience what the indigenous people witness in their lives, particularly the so-called developments that encroach on traditional land.

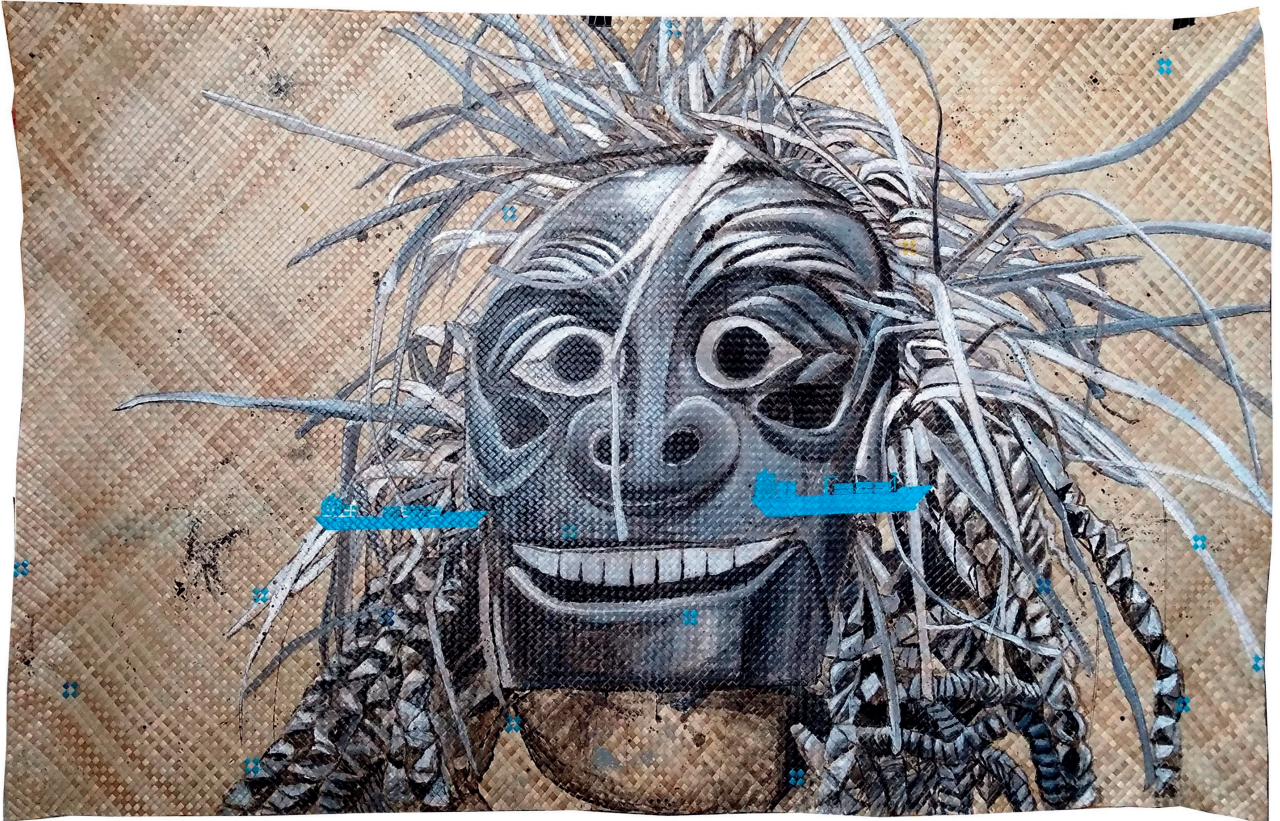


Figure 8. "Sacred Sea Dance"; acrylic on pandanus weaving, 2021

In Malaysia, many think of the indigenous people as gentle people, who will see something happen but not say anything, not protest. But our gentle nature does not give people license to violate our human rights. That is the message of this installation.

In the coastal areas, there is a problem that comes from consumerism. The indigenous communities, especially Mah Meri people who live along the coast, depend on fishing. In the Malacca Strait, there is a lot of shipping. The more ships there are, the more ports they build. The more ports they build, the more ships come. And the ports expand their premises and now encroach onto traditional land.

This affects the Mah Meri people who live from the sea. They are famous for doing ceremonies at the coast to ask the sea for permission and for good luck.



Figure 9. "Nightmare of Moyang Bajos"; oil on canvas, 2020

The Mah Meri community suffered when some mangrove trees were chopped down and others died because of pollution from nearby Port Klang. The painting "Nightmare of Moyang Bajos" shows a Mah Meri person in a mask at a festival celebrating their *moyang* (protector spirit) called Puja Pantai. In the celebration, the community march in their traditional attire, led by masked dancers and shamans, and offer food to the protector spirits.



Figure 10. "Confession of Palm Oil"; acrylic on canvas, 2013

Palm oil plantations are another big problem in Malaysia. Many plantations encroach on peatland in the Selangor area. The Selangor government has removed protection from areas of peatland to facilitate development projects and palm oil plantations. We fight against these projects, and sometimes we get them stopped.



Figure 11. "Pembangunan"; linocut, woodcut and silkscreen on paper, 2006

This is one of the artworks made to respond to the incident where half of Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve was deforested in 2005. I was still in university when this deforestation happened. I felt helpless to stop it. The forest was my childhood playground and where I learned how to hunt with a blowpipe with my friends.



Figure 12. Community art class

I also do performance art to raise awareness of issues, and I do community art activities to encourage young people from the indigenous communities to express themselves. I help them to use visual language. I tell them: there is no need to speak, just draw.

Conclusion

We destroy our forest, especially peatlands, at our peril! If global peatlands are destroyed, the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere will be catastrophic. Our small effort in our local community to save the ancient peatland environment needs to be repeated around the globe. This task needs real commitment given the pressures. Protecting indigenous land rights is a critical environmental strategy, a bottom-up approach to climate mitigation. We are often told “we need the help of the authorities.” I would argue that the authorities can learn from the sustainable lifestyles of indigenous people.

References

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). 2021. *The State of Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' Lands and Territories*. https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/report_the_state_of_the_indigenous_peoples_and_local_communities_lands_and_territor.pdf