

Exploring Social Facts Through The Video Mediums
Notes on Social Relations and Characteristics
of an Orang Asli Society

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The Jah Het (Orang Asli) settlements in the Krau Game Reserve in Pahang has frequently been deluged by avid researches on several occasions in the past. Wednesday, 24th July, 1985, was no different except for the coaster-load of weights in the form of video crew, camera and its accompanying technology. The eight-member video crew which converged on the Krau valley for about a fortnight, comprised of fourth-year students from the Department of Communication, University Kebangsaan Malaysia. The groups's intention was to capture several aspects of the Jah Het community on video and produce a documentary record of various aspects of life of the villagers, about the life of the people, their problems and their traditions.

Prior to the trip, the students had been provided with some relevant literature, still photographs, slides and a brief overview of the Jah Het Community as preliminary exposure before embarking on the trip. They have never had a previous (extended) exposure to the Orang Asli; neither had they followed any semester course on the ethnography of the people they were about to document. The main training was in the field of broadcasting. (The students had undergone Fundamentals of Radio and Television Production courses, and Practicum, in their fourth and fifth semesters. The final-year milestone is application of electronic media techniques using the video medium -- which basically is a one-camera film production technique).

An appropriate pre-production procedure should have included reconnaissance of the locations at hand, dialogue with relevant authorities for detailed facts

and figures, and sufficient time to prepare a working a working guideline (which would include a working script and storyboard). Faced with a time constraint, however, the group had to modify work formats and be vigilant for unscheduled events too valuable to be left unrecorded.

Production Objective

A question that may come to mind is, why the Jah Het? The Jah Het, one of several tribal groups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and mainly confined to Pahang has rather marked physical and mental resemblances to the Malays. Nonetheless, they are a close-knit people who lead very simple lives in the serenity of the jungle peripheries. This provokes the inquisitive mind of the researcher, in this instance armed with video gadgets, to identify the people, their characteristics and their way of life.

The principal aim was to describe visually the research findings, and to share with the public -- both internal and external -- the outcome of a fortnight exposure to and interaction with a misunderstood and neglected society. With the added advantage of both audio and visual to enhance descriptions of the Jah Het, the amateur video crew was thus determined to produce an effective software which could presumably be a "catalyst" to the economic development of the community.

Despite the emphasis on their training, the end question which must be pertinent and which has bearing on methodology is: what images did these students of communication get to project on the screen? And how do these images collectively relate to sociological "facts" about contemporary Orang Asli society, in this case the Jah Het?

Observations

As a preliminary observation, "facts" brought together by the video crew on the Jah Het social situation are of two types. The first is at the

cognitive level. The crew, as researches, were not steeped in the study of the people they were doing the documentary on. In the natural social situation they lived apart, and are socially distinct from the subject of their documentation. On this score, they were socialized with ideas which spelt out the differentials and "separateness" of the Orang Asli society from their own.

The second relates to the kind of "problem" each member of the crew chose to explore and was interested in. Each individual member was concentrating on a particular aspect of the Jah Het society -- way of life, culture, education, health, housing and resettlement problems (if any) -- aspects which can very easily merge and duplicate to some degree with that the others were doing. These they discovered as they went along. In the end what was collated as images, seemed to depict certain clear findings, namely:

1. that the "differences" between Orang Asli and "outsiders", particularly Malays, were apparently non-outstanding differences. The differences exist but so do the "sameness" in various aspects, such as physical resemblances between the two.
2. the differences give rise to forms of consciousness regarding common "origins" between them. These were stated in contexts such as social, historical, political and cultural.
3. there is evidence of cross-cultural between the Malays (who are Muslims) and the predominantly animistic Jah Het, particularly in certain denotative terms in religion.
4. the mundane problems of existing and incipient poverty, compared especially with other Malaysians living in cities and urban peripherals. The instances projected clearly showed evidences of general lack of sophisticated technology in the Jah Het society, and the distasteful exploitation of an impoverished community by some relatively advanced "outsiders".

5. the "positive" confidence in their cultural heritage, the memory of the nenek moyang and traditions passed down for generations of Jah Hets. It is a demonstration of the intelligence and the "plasticity" of the Jah Het people (which undoubtedly have been derived from their religion, traditions and way of life). Despite this, they are completely "at home" in their village, but are yet to adapt to demands of modern day living.
6. the rather slow acceptance of innovations especially among the elderlies in the community lend credence to the defeatist attitude of some government change agents lacking in empathy and finance.
7. in health matters, the Jah Het would readily consult the puyang (medicine man) rather than visit government health centres. Even minor complaints do not go unheeded and gamilies get together almost promptly to help the "sick" by "ridding the souls and bodies of bas (evil spirits)" through melancholic songs and music that are played deep into the night and which ironically bring out the artistic talents and the extreme resourcefulness of the society.
8. the Jah Het show through awareness of the ecological environment, the slowly shrinking and disappearing world they are now living in. They "measure" this through the crops they have not been able to cultivate well, the progressive depletion of forest products, and the lack of fish in the rivers.
9. despite the state of relative deprivation in the economic sense (which is well below the national poverty lines), Jah Het nonetheless spend lavishly on certain ritual feasts, such as circumcision. The conspicuous spending is social in its purpose and to a large degree in indication of the vitality of their own sense of distinctness (and continuity) with the external social order. This is especially relevant in the context of the

dialectical relationship with the Malay (gob) social order.

10. in spite of the outward grandeur of certain ritual feasts they are apparently sensitive to insinuations and indiscriminate actions of seemingly "superior" gobs. This is retaliated by a silent and discreet act of non-cooperation on the part of the Jah Het. On the contrary, trusted friends are accepted into their folds unreservedly and treated as members of the family.
11. the dropout rate among the Jah Het schoolchildren is rather alarming to the educated majority, but there is a slow realisation among parents of the importance of education especially in uplifting their standard of living. However, exposure to other external environment seems to provide the needed impetus and awareness.

Postproduction

A trip that began with 1001 questions and individual visions ended with a treasure load of approximately 480-minute worth of recorded images preciously stored in over 20 U-matic tapes. These were then laboriously and painstakingly previewed to provide the editor and scriptwriter with the most appropriate visuals that would also synchronise with the narration.

The finished video product is thus a culmination of weeks of perspiration and inspiration by a team. A video production (or a television/film production) would not materialise without the cooperation of each member of the team, talents and other relevant authorities. In this respect, the video crew fortunate to have had the complete cooperation of everyone including the Jah Het and the respectable Batin Long, who unabashedly "performed" for the "cameramen" and "camerawomen", all of whom are fledglings in the production world.

Conclusion

The whole "exploration" became an invaluable lesson not only in video production but most importantly in the social interaction with a community that are rightful citizens of the country but who, through some oversight, and neglect are almost non-shareholders in the country's economic cake. What began with some apprehension ultimately ended with a warm understanding and a mutual acceptance of a Jah Het gob relationship.

The electronic media, including video, are undeniably powerful instruments which should be utilised by opinion leaders and change agents to influence the "laggards and hardcores" in development. The Jah Het, as a people, do welcome economic change in their standard of living without having to sacrifice their values and norms. The question is when and how would they begin. The video documentary is this an attempt at instilling an effective awareness among the public of a people at the crossroads of change.