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Agents of Change Towards Sustainability

*Journey of Making a Difference:
 From Whole Person to
 Whole Society Transformation*



Edited by
Wan Zahidah Wan Zulkifle

sejahtera@iiu.edu.my
 centre.iiu.edu.my/sejahtera



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CHAPTER 06

TIRKAH RIMBA: JAKUN TRIBE AND THEIR UNIQUENESS

Author:
DR. MOHAMAD SUHAIZI SUHAIMI



'Tirkah' is a classical Malay word that means heritage, while 'Rimba' means forest. We often associate the forest to plants and animal life. However, we rarely discuss the people who reside in the forest, namely the *Orang Asli* (aborigines or indigenous community). Therefore, I chose to focus on this community from the perspectives of language, culture and tourism, which are intriguing aspects to showcase to the wider public. I named this project 'Tirkah Rimba' to delve deeper into these aspects.



Figure 1: Tirkah Rimba Logo

This project started in 2021 as one of the flagship projects under the Office for Strategy and Institutional Change (OSIC), IIUM. After obtaining approval from OSIC, 'Tirkah Rimba' began its journey. This project focused on indigenous people around Muar and the community involved consists of the Jakun tribe.

To enter the Orang Asli village, we required permission from the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA). Permission needs to be applied for at least a month in advance, and after approval, we need to contact JAKOA in the relevant district, including the 'Tok Batin' of the involved village. 'Tok Batin' is among the Orang Asli community itself and serves as the head of village.

After obtaining this permission, our group of Final Year Project students headed to Kampung Sentosa, Lenga, Muar, Johor. With no prior experience in *Orang Asli* villages, we ventured there blindly. However, our journey there was not as pleasant as we had hoped, as our presence was not warmly welcomed by the locals. Those who were sitting outside their homes quickly went inside and those whose doors we knocked on closed them again upon seeing unfamiliar visitors. At that time, 'Tok Batin' was on his trip into the forest, thus preventing us from enjoying his company.

This event reignited my enthusiasm to continue with the 'Tirkah Rimba' project and to help the Orang Asli progress and become recognised by all segments of society. For me, this community has a unique language and culture that should be a highlight for Malaysians as a whole. Additionally, the residents here can increase their income when their culture and heritage are turned into high-quality tourism products.



Figure 2: Together with Final Year Project (FYP) students and Jakun Orang Asli children

We were almost in despair. My students seemed lost, discouraged to continue with the project. We felt like strangers in the midst of a village isolated by the surrounding community. Seeing this situation, I decided to bring back the students to the campus's residence to nurse our disappointment.

Upon returning, I reflected deeply on how to carry on with the project. With students losing motivation and our lack of experience working with *Orang Asli*, I was almost ready to 'close the chapter' on this project. However, at the same time, I continued to search online for information about the behaviour of Orang Asli. My research revealed that this community was rather shy and prone to distant themselves from unfamiliar individuals. I realised I had made a mistake by not conducting more in-depth research on this community prior to the visit.

After three days and a better understanding of the dynamics and nature of Orang Asli, we returned to the village. This time, we ensured that 'Tok Batin' had the time to assist us during our presence. This was because Orang Asli community had a high level of trust and felt safer with 'Tok Batin' around. This was made clear during our visit as we managed to have friendly and cordial conversations with the people there, with the help of 'Tok Batin'. While not all data were successfully obtained, at least the meetings were no longer as tense as they had been the days before.

One of the 'crazy tasks' I have undertaken was to ask the *Orang Asli* community to build a traditional hut in the space of *Mahallah Zaid bin Harithah*, IIUM, Pagoh. This was because their traditional huts are incredibly unique and carry a profound philosophy for every material and name used in their construction. Initially, they declined the invitation due to the long distance between their village and the *Mahallah* and they felt shy about meeting university students and staffs. However, with persistent persuasion, they eventually agreed to build the traditional hut in the *Mahallah* area.

The construction, which took half a day, showcased their remarkable skills in building the hut in a very traditional way. No holes were dug with shovels; they simply hammered the ground using sharpened wooden stakes until the main pillars were firmly anchored. Most of the *Mahallah* residents who witnessed the construction were amazed by the methods used. Eventually, the traditional hut, named '*Pondok Sejahtera*' was successfully built in the *Mahallah* on December 16, 2021 and it is still standing there to this day. The hut was officially inaugurated by Prof Emeritus Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, the Rector of IIUM.



Figure 3: Pondok Sejahtera

One of the experiences I could not forget was when some of the *Orang Asli* mistook me for a university student. We managed to hold back our laughter and just played along with the situation. Some of the *Orang Asli* even wanted to arrange a marriage for me, but I responded with, "I am loyal to someone."

Next, the subject known as *Usrah in Action* was introduced at the university level. This subject aims to encourage students to carry out community engagement related projects. I see this as a great opportunity to further develop the 'Tirkah Rimba' project, which already benefits the community.

The *Usrah in Action* subject which is SCSH 2163 section 513 has added value to the 'Tirkah Rimba' project, allowing it to be taken to a higher level. Through this subject, students were assigned with the tasks of gathering information about the *Orang Asli* and assisting in the preservation and maintenance of their language and culture.



Figure 4: Usrah in Action student and Orang Asli community

One of the tasks that held significant meaning for us regarding the *Orang Asli* is that, as non-indigenous people, we taught the *Orang Asli* community how to play *Kercang* (a traditional game of the *Jakun* tribe). This is because *Kercang* is no longer played by them and many of them no longer know what *Kercang* is. We learnt the game and reintroduced it to the community. It may seem unique and strange, but that is the knowledge sharing that took place.

Therefore, the 'Tirkah Rimba' project has taught me to open my mind and embrace the diversity among the people whom Allah has placed on this earth. Everyone is different, but that is what reflects upon me, encouraging me to continue to serve and contribute meaningfully to society as long as I am alive. May the service we provide be blessed by Allah and bring countless benefits to those who receive it.

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Sejahtera Centre for Sustainability and Humanity
International Islamic University Malaysia
P.O Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur Malaysia
Tel: +6036421 5411/5408/5400
Email: sejahtera@iium.edu.my

