



**TENETS OF MAH MERI ORAL TRADITION AND COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN PULAU CAREY, SELANGOR, MALAYSIA**

**By**

**MOHD HAIKAL BIN ZUHAIRI**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Master of Science**

**January 2023**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia  
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**Chairman : Mohd Roslan Rosnon, PhD**  
**Faculty : Human Ecology**

The are many types of Malaysia Indigenous people that are also known as Orang Asli for Malaysia Peninsular which consists of eighteen different ethnicities, and the Mah Meri people are one of them, under the big Senoi group. Almost all of the Mah Meri people live along the coastal region of the west part of Selangor, from Sungai Pelek up to Pulau Carey. For many years, the government and many other stakeholders have done initiatives to improve the Orang Asli, however, the results were not satisfactory. Despite the efforts taken, the Orang Asli is still considered the least-developed community compared to the other mainstream people. The executed development initiatives and policies may be more quantity-oriented, instead of quality-oriented. The Orang Asli might have different values and belief systems which can vary. Thus, 'one shoe fits all' approaches might not be effective to be applied to the Orang Asli, but better carefully-designed approaches may fit better with the people's needs and values. This study attempted to investigate tenets of the Mah Meri oral tradition, to understand community development goals from the perspective of the Mah Meri people, and to discuss the influences of the tenets in Mah Meri's perspectives towards their community development goals. By using the theory of Structural Functionalism this research analyses the tenets of the Mah Meri oral tradition to understand their meanings and influences, besides their roles in achieving Mah Meri community development goals. In-depth interviews were conducted among the Mah Meri respondents, covering the area of oral traditions and contemporary issues, to synthesis the relationship between the oral tradition tenets with their community development goals. Five identified tenets are revolved around the Mah Meri's oral tradition which are *Kemali*, *Tulah*, *Bentan*, *Maruk*, and *Tuil*. It is found that most of the tenets are bad karmic-consequence oriented, that instills fear, instead of reward-oriented that instills motivation. The findings show that the essences of these five tenets are universal, and are still believed by the Mah Meri people. However, they are manifested in different views, forms and

practices, as the contemporary context of economics, social and politic development are different compared to the past. The values and belief system of the Mah Meri people are still been believed and practised, even in different forms and contexts today. The Mah Meri community development goals are still sustained, aimed and favoured by the Mah Meri today as well, being shaped and influenced by the tenets of the Mah Meri oral tradition. Thus, this research is important to understand how the Mah Meri people behave and react to their livelihood, besides perceiving their community development goals which are affected and influenced by the tenets of their oral tradition.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**PRINSIP-PRINSIP TRADISI LISAN MAH MERI DAN MATLAMAT  
PEMBANGUNAN KOMUNITI DI PULAU CAREY, SELANGOR,  
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Terdapat banyak jenis masyarakat Orang Asli Malaysia di Semenanjung Malaysia, yang terdiri daripada lapan belas etnik yang berbeza, seperti masyarakat Mah Meri di bawah kumpulan besar Senoi. Hampir semua orang Mah Meri tinggal di persisiran bahagian barat Selangor, dari daerah Sungai Pelek sehingga ke Pulau Carey. Selama bertahun-tahun, kerajaan dan banyak pihak berkepentingan lain telah melakukan inisiatif untuk meningkatkan pembangunan Orang Asli, namun hasilnya masih tidak memuaskan. Di sebalik usaha yang dilakukan, Orang Asli masih dianggap kurang membangun berbanding masyarakat arus perdana yang lain. Inisiatif dan dasar pembangunan yang dilaksanakan mungkin lebih berorientasikan kuantiti, bukannya berorientasikan kualiti. Setiap etnik Orang Asli mungkin mempunyai nilai dan sistem kepercayaan yang berbeza. Maka, satu pendekatan untuk semua situasi berbeza mungkin tidak berkesan untuk digunakan kepada Orang Asli, tetapi pendekatan yang direka dengan teliti mungkin lebih bersesuaian, dengan keperluan dan nilai mereka. Kajian ini mendalami pegangan tradisi lisan Mah Meri, cuba memahami matlamat pembangunan masyarakat dari perspektif orang Mah Meri, dan membincangkan pengaruh pegangan dalam perspektif Mah Meri terhadap matlamat pembangunan komuniti mereka. Dengan menggunakan teori Struktural Fungsionalisme, kajian ini menganalisis pegangan tradisi lisan Mah Meri untuk memahami makna dan fungsinya, selain peranannya dalam mencapai matlamat pembangunan masyarakat Mah Meri. Temu bual mendalam telah dijalankan dalam kalangan responden Mah Meri, meliputi aspek tradisi lisan dan isu-isu semasa, untuk menghubungkan-kaitkan pegangan tradisi lisan dengan matlamat pembangunan masyarakat mereka. Terdapat lima pegangan yang dikenal pasti berdasarkan tradisi lisan Mah Meri iaitu unsur *Kemali*, *Tulah*, *Bentan*, *Maruk*, dan *Tuil*. Didapati bahawa kebanyakan pegangan adalah berorientasikan akibat karma yang buruk, yang menimbulkan ketakutan,

bukannya berorientasikan ganjaran yang menanamkan motivasi. Penemuan ini menunjukkan intipati lima pegangan ini bersifat universal, dan masih dipercayai oleh masyarakat Mah Meri. Walau bagaimanapun, pegangan-pegangan ini dimanifestasikan dalam pandangan, bentuk dan amalan yang berbeza, kerana konteks kontemporari pembangunan ekonomi, sosial dan politik Mah Meri adalah berbeza berbanding dengan masa lalu. Nilai dan sistem kepercayaan Mah Meri masih diyakini dan diamalkan, walaupun dalam bentuk dan konteks yang berbeza hari ini. Matlamat pembangunan komuniti Mah Meri masih dikekalkan, disasarkan dan digemari oleh kaum Mah Meri hari ini juga, dalam masa yang sama, dibentuk dan mempengaruhi oleh pegangan tradisi lisan mereka. Oleh itu, penyelidikan ini penting untuk memahami bagaimana masyarakat Mah Meri berkelakuan dan bertindak balas dalam kehidupan mereka, selain melihat matlamat pembangunan komuniti mereka yang dipengaruhi oleh prinsip tradisi lisan mereka.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

When the first time I met Dr Roslan, he instantly ignited my sparks to explore Malaysia Orang Asli folklore and oral tradition studies deeper. His insight and vision on the research idea were also aligned with mine, which later became one of my motivation pillars for me in keeping up with this research project, and eventually completing it. This project would not have been possible without Dr Roslan's support, continuous motivation and advice, especially when I needed them the most. I would like to offer my special and sincere thanks to Dr Roslan Rosnon for being my mentor and guidance throughout this research journey. Thank you for your support, and for being an ideal teacher, and wonderful thesis supervisor. I also would like to thank Prof. Dr. Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah who was my second research supervisor, and also to the rest of the Faculty of Human Ecology members who also have contributed to this research journey and progress. A special thanks to the Mah Meri community in Pulau Carey for the warm welcome during my research visits, and to the interviewed respondents; I am humbly honoured for being able to hear and know your beautiful stories and lore. I wish the efforts of ensuring the Mah Meri stories and lore to be heard and shared won't stop here, but also to be continued by future researchers to dive deeper into this.

I also would like to express my sincere gratitude to Vamp Lee, thank you for your continuous support since the beginning of our research journey. We have made it this far together, and definitely, because of having you as an amazing colleague, peer, friend and brother. I am honoured and grateful for having you as my support system, and motivation. Many thanks to both of my late parents, Rosmah Bahasin and Zuhairi Zakaria for your continuous support and motivation unconditionally throughout this journey. It has been my pleasure to be able to share the Mah Meri stories with both of you during the beginning of my research journey, and indeed it was my pleasure too when exchanging my story about both of you, with the Mah Meri people that I met during my research visits. You both are my ultimate inspiration, thank you for believing in me, even since the beginning when I started developing my interest in art, literature and cultural studies, and for giving your support and motivation throughout this research journey. This research is dedicated to both of you.

Finally, my special and sincere thanks to Mr Dee, Leo and the siblings, Ethan Low, Daniel, and Apple, for being there when I needed you the most, and, for everything. My appreciation also goes out to the rest of my family members and friends, for their encouragement and support throughout my studies.

This work is also my tribute to all of you; all Malaysia Orang Asli voices and stories, and not to be forgotten, to fellow and future researchers in this field; this work is an Ode to all of you, the Seers of Old.

Haikal Zuhairi

April 2023





This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of The Study

The Mah Meri people believe that any unusual geographic or nature features such as large rocks or natural forces like lightning are all resided by spirits or superstitious beings (Carey, 1973). Regardless of this belief, they do believe in the existence of God that is known as *Tuhan* that created the world and all beings. However, *Tuhan* has very little interest in men's affairs. Hence, once a year, the Mah Meri people would celebrate *Ari' Muyang's* or 'Ancestor's Day Celebration' to pay respects and celebrate the ancestors, the spirits, and the *Tuhans*. These superstitious beliefs and practices have been becoming their important coping mechanisms when they face any life crisis especially those that are related to birth, marriage, divorce or death. Since the Mah Meri people believe in animism, thus their belief system does not have any specific documented doctrine just like other types of religions. However, the tenets of their belief system are embodied within the oral tradition of the people; such as folklore, traditional stories, lores, myths and legends which are been passed down from generation to generation since the old days. By understanding the tenets of the Mah Meri oral tradition, the people and the community may be understood better, in terms of their life principles and values.

Thus, this research aims to investigate how the tenets of the Mah Meri oral tradition influence the community development goals. By understanding and analysing the influence of the oral tradition tenets in Mah Meri perception and view towards their community development goals, it is hoped that the understanding can, and may give clearer outlines and guidance on how the Mah meri people behave and react in their lives, thus allowing stakeholders such as government agencies and NGOs to participate better in putting community development initiatives and efforts, in a more sustainable, and effective manner.

#### 1.2 Problem Statement

The Mah-Meri people are widely and internationally known and recognized for their traditional and cultural wooden carvings. Due to this art's popularity as well, it is found that many researches and studies have been done on the Mah-Meri people and their affairs from many spectrums. Endicott and Dentan (2014) have discussed the concern of the Mah-Meri people from a

political perspective, on how the government of Malaysia had an agenda to 'integrate' the Orang Asli into Malaysia's 'mainstream community'. Endicott and Dentan argued further how this attempt has been demonstrated, but has failed, besides criticizing the management of JHEOA for being racial biased and ironic by only appointing Malay officers instead any Orang Asli representatives in the department. JHEOA is the *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli* or *Department of Orang Asli Affairs*, which was the former name for JAKOA (*Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli* or The Department of Orang Asli Development). On the other hand, Duku and Abdulamin (2017) commended the uniqueness of the Mah-Meri people when it comes to their history, background, carvings, rituals and beliefs. Duku and Abdulamin also expressed their concerns about preserving these as they are part of national identity and heritage that should not be forgotten. From different lenses, Shahril, Zahari, Hamizad and Shuhirdy (2012) made an attempt to investigate and explore the connection between the Orang Asli's displacement and food practices, also drawing examples and cases from the Mah Meri people. As a part of Malaysia's Orang Asli, some researchers also were interested in studying further the aspects of arts and languages specifically due to the uniqueness of Orang Asli linguistic aspects. Yaspar (1985) were one of those who made an early attempt at studying and analysing these features. Yaspar made an interesting discussion on how groups of people view themselves and their societies from nature and supernatural perspectives, citing and mentioning the Malay and Orang Asli's folk-tales and drama. Further on, Ghani (2015) discussed the relationship between the linguistic elements of the Orang Asli with teaching and education, and preserving the Orang Asli's languages in the future. Nambiar and Govindasamy (2010) made further discussion the challenges faced in preserving the Orang Asli's languages by specifically seeing into the factors, issues and challenges. When it comes to accomplishment, Yusof and Sidi (2015) studied the relationship between Mah-Meri's carvings with their success in the tourism sector. Kunasekaran (2013), Yusof and Sidi (2015) and Majin, Azman and Jailani (2016) made a further claim that Mah-Meri is the best model of Malaysia's Orang Asli when it comes to Orang Asli tourism and economic development, as well as the level of openness, compared to the other 17 Orang Asli ethnics. This is also due to the establishment of Mah Meri Cultural Village in 2011 as an initiative by the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia to catalyse national tourism progresses especially in the Orang Asli and cultural tourism.

Drawing from the existing and current Literature Review, the researcher found that there is a potential gap on the matter of Mah Meri people. It is interesting when seeing and analysing the amount of past research and studies being done on the Mah-Meri people, they are also been praised and commended as the best model of Orang Asli in the Malaysia peninsular contemporary (Yusof and Sidi, 2015). Most of the research and studies also mainly focused on a belief system (Karim, 1981; Werner, 1997; Mokhtar and Aini, 2014), culture and tradition (Carey, 1973; Rahim, 2007; Chan, 2010; Azyntee, 2013; Pang et al, 2014; Wardhana et al, 2014), arts and language (Radzi, 2003; Stevens et al, 2006; Ching, 2009; Coluzzi et al, 2016), (iv) health (Wan et al, 2007), environment (Rahman, 2010; Haliza, 2010),



economics and social (Roddin and Siti, 2013; Kunasekaran et al, 2013; Harun, 2015; Roddin et al, 2015; Lai, 2016; Majin et al, 2016), and tourism (Kunasekaran et al, 2017; Roddin et al, 2017; Ting and Abella, 2017; Shah et al, 2018). Been said that the past studies and research on the Mah Meri people lack focus on the people's oral tradition and folklore narrative, in relation to the people's community development goals.

The research has found that the Mah-Meri people could potentially be studied from the perspective of Community Development perspective respectively, and dive deeper into tenets of their oral tradition, which are also, the tenets of their lives. By approaching the Mah meri community through a Community Development lens, the subject can be studied deeper in getting to know their life tenets which are also the tenets of their belief system, thus the outcome of the research would be significantly crucial in proposing and suggesting policies related to the Mah-Meri people. The researcher also found that no research or study has been done on approaching the Mah-Meri people, specifically to investigate and see the connection between their belief core and life tenets, and values, with their lifestyle, community empowerment and community mechanisms. The closest studies and documentations found are Werner's *Mah-Meri* (1997) and Yub's *Mah Meri Sculpture* (1980) in which these two captured and documented the stories of the Mah-Meri people's beliefs such as stories of spirits, deities and their ancestors, as well as how they personified these stories and lores into traditional wooden carvings. Indeed, these two works that are found have analysed roughly the community's values and core with the wooden carvings. However, there is no literature review found where the study sees a relationship between the Mah-Meri people's beliefs such as the story of the spirits, deities and their ancestors with their other community's features, aspects and elements, like, community development goals, in this narrative.

Having said so, this study attempts and proposes to understand the tenets of the Mah Meri oral tradition and to investigate how the tenets of the Mah Meri oral tradition influence the community development goals. Furthermore, Bonney (2016) also highlighted the merit of potential in executing research that is similar to this. Bonney stated that in the past, most anthropological research has highlighted more on analysis of folklore and oral tradition within a community, rather than its functional and practical role in the community. Hence, the direction of this research is justified, in analysing the relationship between the tenets of Mah Meri oral tradition with the people's lives, and the tenets' functional and practical roles in the community development goals of the Mah Meri people.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The Research Questions that are expected to be answered as outcomes of this research are as follows:

- a) What are the tenets of the Mah Meri oral tradition?
- b) What are the community development goals of the Mah Meri people?
- c) How do the tenets Mah Meri oral tradition influence the Mah Meri's perspective on their community development goals?

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

Evans (2010) stated that oral tradition does validate the values and beliefs of a community. Thus, the outcome of the study is expected to be significant as a reference material in proposing any relatable development policies and plans of the Mah-Meri people in the future. Furthermore, the model and the framework of the study also is expected to be important and can be used by the other Orang Asli ethnics and groups, to investigate their life tenets and values, thus ensuring that any proposed plans and policies are aligned with the Orang Asli life values, and community development goals.

Therefore, the main objectives of this study are:

- a) To explore the tenets of the Mah Meri Oral tradition
- b) To understand the community development goals from the perspective of the Mah Meri people
- c) To discuss the influence of the Mah Meri oral tradition tenets on the Mah Meri community development goals perspective

### **1.5 Conceptual Framework**

#### **1.5.1 Structural Functionalism**

##### **1.5.1.1 Definitions**

Structural functionalism was early known and introduced in North American sociology in 1950s, which also was the flourishing period of Western capitalism. It is also considered sociology's first major theoretical and methodological approach attempting to understand, interpret and analyse

the social universe (Turner, 2017) Even though functionalism was prominent during the era of 1950's, its origin and fundamentals can be found in the earlier generation of scholars in the school of sociological theory such as Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), and Emile Durkheim (1859-1917). As stated by Kingsburry and Scanzoni (2009), structural functionalism is a form of response to the era of the eighteenth-century French Revolution, the nineteenth-century European urbanization and the industrialization, social and political strains. Derived by the previous ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato that also were concerned about issues and problems of social order, Thomas Hobbes, a seventeenth-century social philosopher claimed further that humans are destructive in a way of being self-interested beings, thus are always in constant danger of "the war of each against all". Hence, the functionalist approach then was introduced by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who stressed the need for cohesion after the social malaise of the French Revolution happened.

Based on Turner (2017), structural functionalism was once 'historically' considered 'disappeared' in the world of sociology. This was due to the changes in the societies of Europe as they were shifting from 'primitive' to 'advanced' societies. Due to these changes, many scholars reacted and emerged from social Darwinism rejecting and furthering away from most stage models of evolution, such as functionalism. Spencer's death in 1903 and followed by Durkheim's death during World War 1 also furtherly caused an absence and vacant of sociologists embracing evolutionary analysis. By 1920's, the evolutionary and functional analysis in sociology was dead in sociology (Turner and Maryanski, 1979). However, years after that, functionalism regained its popularity and was revived by anthropologists.

This was a very important turning point for Structural Functionalism which initially originated from sociology, and started being applied in anthropology as well. This phenomenon of a theory deriving from a field but later on developing and expanding into other fields and disciplines is common, just as Structural Functionalism itself is commonly getting applied beyond the sociology field itself, but also in anthropology, and other fields of social sciences and humanities (Functionalism and structural functionalism, n.d). This form of transformation indeed is important for the theory to be developed deeper and better, thus allowing more scholars and researchers to apply it in any and other relevant case studies (Bardnard, A. 2004).

Two renowned anthropologists, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski used functionalism in their works, commentaries and, analyses to explain cultural traits evident among societies. It seemed that functionalism offered anthropologists a way of analysing how a feature or mechanism affects and contributes to the sustainability, maintenance, solidarity, stability and survival which the end goal is achieving the state of equilibrium of societies by satisfying certain fundamental needs. Later on, functionalism came roaring back in Talcott Parsons works and also by other

contemporary scholars (Turner, 2017). This concept is applied and used in this research to understand how the mechanism of the identified tenets of Mah Meri people affect the Mah Meri community development goals, which lead to community stability and solidarity. The usage of Structural Functionalism in cultural studies and anthropology is not something new but should be embraced, so the development and advancement of the theory could occur (Harris, M. 1968; Upadhyay, V.S & Pandey, G. 1993).

Thus, structural functionalism is seen as a theory under sociology and anthropology which broadly sees and interprets society as one big and whole institution that is made up of many connected sub-institutions, constituent mechanisms or elements which are also a form of attempt to understand social phenomena. These are could be known as norms, traditions and customs (Bredemeier, 1955). Emile Durkheim also explained that in general, structural functionalism sees societies as developing and evolving from simple to more complex beings that with complexity occurred could cause problems of integration among the members (Turner, 2017). Meaning that the more complex a society becomes, the more it becomes prone to social problems and issues. Karkia and Gartoulla (2015) simplified the definition of structural functionalism as a methodology to explain and investigate the 'how' and 'why' a society functions the way it does by emphasizing the links between the various constituent mechanisms that made up the society. Thus, structural functionalism asks bigger questions, which are on how a feature, mechanism, or cell promotes the survival of the system or the society because a system is meant of surviving and to be survived. The second question is enquiring about what peoples do and what social systems need to survive and sustain themselves in their environments. In this narrative, applying Structural Functionalism analysis in understanding the lives, and the community development goals of the Mah Meri people, allows researchers and stakeholders to see, perceive, and understand the Mah Meri people in bigger pictures, and from bigger perspectives.

Therefore, the feature, the mechanism, and the cell must be functional for the system. Quoted by Mahner and Bunge (2016), Radcliffe-Brown credited Durkheim by making a further explanation about functionalism as an attempt to see the relationship between a social function with the social life of the community as a whole in maintaining the structure, continuity and stability of the community. Radcliffe-Brown accepted Durkheim's argument of 'equilibrium', solidarity and stability which later also been credited to Parson's response and argument (Stocking, 1984). In additional, Mahner and Bunge summarized Radcliffe-Brown's explanation of functionalism that every feature of the constituent mechanisms serves and has some functions. In another argument to support this, Levine *et al* (1976) said that all the constituent mechanisms and structures are inter-related, depended and affected each other, just as how "A impacts B who influences A who impacts B, and so on". Pitman (2009) also argued that functionalism serves and justifies an issue by assuming a dynamic tension between the interests of social actors or the community members and the social systems to which

they belong. This argument is to see any link or correlation between the identified tenets, with any aspects of the people lie hood that may lead to achieving their community development goals.

John (2000) quotes Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* (1874) by saying that the constituent mechanisms of society are 'organs' that function and serve toward the 'body', which is the society itself. Emile Durkheim further explained and discussed functionalism as the quest for 'social facts' (Bourricaud 1981). Thus, structural functionalism looks at and sees society from a large-scale, whole, holistic and micro perspective, as a society itself is made from several connected structures, mechanisms and ways of thinking and acting, to meet and satisfy the society's needs and the goals (Susser, 1992).

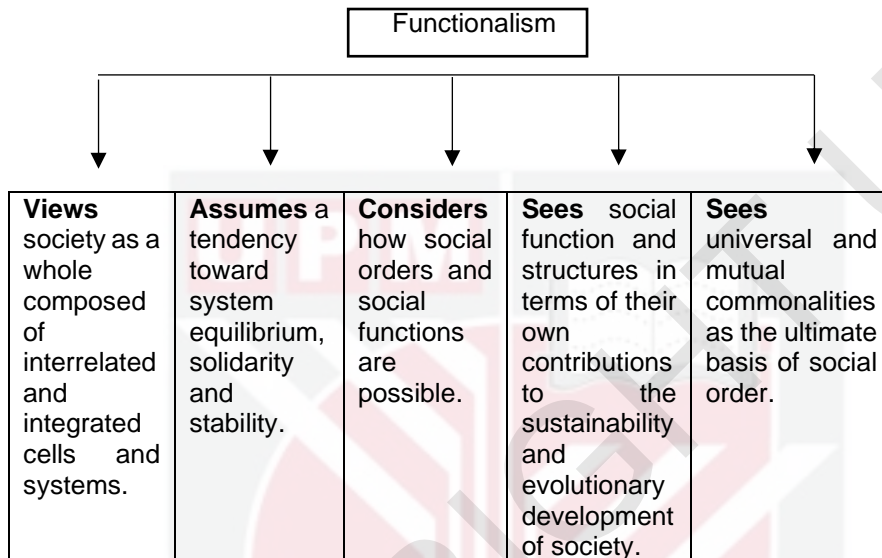
Kingsbury and Scanzoni (2009) quoted Parsons as saying that the main function of moral values is to restrain and limit men's claims and wants. Thus, in a different analogy, constituent mechanisms, social functions and structures serve a similar purpose which is restraining and limiting men's behaviour by instilling control. This is to archive a state of equilibrium, solidarity and stability in society. Parsons supported the argument by defining 'solidarity' as "motivational readiness to accept their common belongingness as members of a collective system and to trust each other to fulfil mutual expectations attached to membership in their respective roles" (Kingsbury and Scanzoni, 2009). Having said so, it means that the goal of archiving stability is about accepting the mutual expectations of each other to serve back the collective belief in one particular society, as an obligation of the community member. Furthermore, Parsons defined that the meaning of 'greater good' in archiving equilibrium is the 'survival' of the community. Thus for a community to keep survive, the members of the community must persist and endure the changes, internally or externally either by adapting or rejecting them. To relate to the statement, Kingsbury and Scanzoni added that society also can be defined as "a social system which survives its original members [and] replaces them through biological reproduction" (Winch, 1963). Therefore, it can be concluded that functionalism sees and perceives a survival of a community by archiving and maintaining equilibrium, solidarity, and stability.

In this context, functionalists see the family is an important cell and structure in a community as families could satisfy the physical and psychological needs of the community members, which also serves to maintain the larger society. McIntyre (1966) used a family unit as an example by claiming that external changes could affect the family unit to become "disequilibrium" or unstable. Thus, once this is affected, so does it would affect the larger society as well.

On the other side, the nature of functionalism as argued by Durkheim is to see and analyse how certain societies could maintain internal stability and survive from time to time. In other words, functionalism aims to reach and



sustain the solidarity and stability of the community. By quoting Durkheim himself, Pope (1957) attributed Durkheim as one of the progenitors of structural-functionalism in anthropology and sociology. Moreover, Coser and Rosenberg (1969) also commended Durkheim by claiming that the most influential functionalist as Radcliffe-Brown, K. Davis, Merton and Parsons have been greatly influenced by Durkheim's works as well. In his work, Pope (1957) also outlined that structural functionalism in general is aimed to:



**Figure 1: Structural Functionalism Objectives**

Durkheim suggested that societies are bonded by shared values or common symbols or also known as 'organic solidarity'. In understanding the Mah Meri people better, there are existing communal elements that unite and glue the community members together, for them to 'function and operate' well as a whole community. Durkheim's nephew Marcel Mauss extended the definition of these values as 'systems of exchange' which resulting a strong interdependence between the constituent mechanisms. The strong interdependence resulted allow the societies to function like organisms or cells, with various constituent mechanisms working together to achieve an overall social equilibrium and stability (Malinowski 1944; Brown 1950; Parsons 1951). Bernard (2000) gives an organic analogy of how society works like an organism:

Reproductive system	Circulatory System
Digestive system	Nervous system

*Systems of an organism*

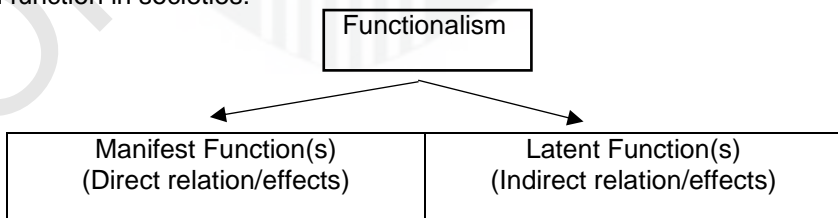
Kinship	Religion
Economics	Politics

*System of a community*

**Figure 2: An organic analogy: systems in a society, a comparison with systems in an organism**

As an example, Durkheim said that the military, industry and family have social functions since they have their respective contributions and roles in defending, nurturing, and assuring the sustainability and continuity of society. Just like the human body, social scholars and philosophers used this analogy saying that a society, like the body, is an interconnected and interrelated cell functioning by its parts respectively. Therefore, a well-functioning body is a state of 'equilibrium' solidarity and stability when all the cells and organs work well, and so does how a society functions and operates. In this narrative, it is hoped that the same analogy may be derived from the Mah Meri people, to understand the community system and mechanisms, of how the Mah Meri community behave and react in their lives. Durkheim made his further claim on functionalism that it serves as seeing and depicting society as existing in or tending toward a state of equilibrium, solidarity and stability. To archive this, social functions and structures play roles in ensuring the state of the society is as stated, as well as serves as a variable ability of society in controlling an individual (Durkheim, 1974).

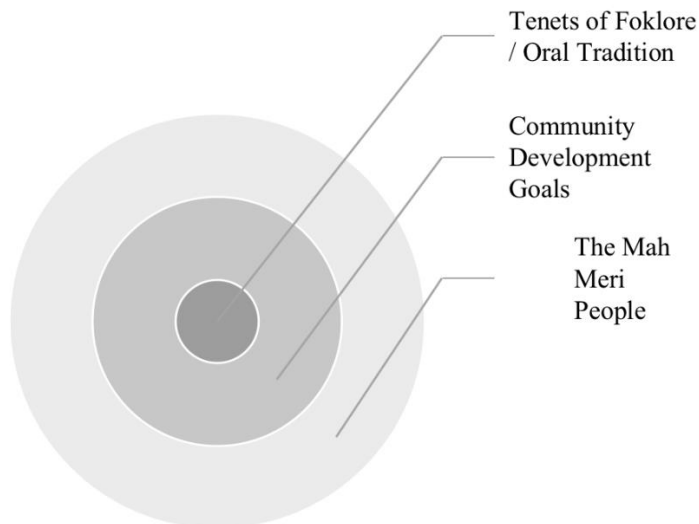
Based on Merton in his work *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949), there are two types of functions under functionalism that can be classified and categorized, to dig further into how the constituent mechanisms serve and function in societies:



**Figure 3: Two types of functions under Functionalism**

Manifest functions are the constituent mechanisms that have original, direct and intended purposes of institutions. Meanwhile, latent functions are the constituent mechanisms that have indirect and unintended consequences and effects on institutions. Furthermore, Merton claims that if societies could

accept the “degrees of integration, then practices can ‘survive’ if they are functional for *some* individuals or groups” (Holmwood, 2005). Another metaphor that can be related to this context is by seeing a school. Intently, a school serve as a place for students to learn and study. This is the manifest function of the school. However, the school also offers another function, which is allowing the students to develop their social and interpersonal skills by interacting with each other in a social context. This unintended and unofficial function of the school is the latent function.



**Figure 4: Research Framework**

There, it is expected that the outcome of this research may show and outline any manifest functions or direct effects, and latent functions or indirect effects of the Mah Meri oral tradition tenets on Mah Meri community development goal perspectives.

### 1.5.1.2 Conclusion

Structural Functionalism is no longer new in the academic world, mainly in anthropology and sociology field. This section will discuss the literature surveys found regarding the theory proposed which is Structural Functionalism that will be used in conducting this research. It found that many scholars both from anthropology and sociology discussed the importance as well as the application and methodology of structural functionalism in the papers. Pope (1975) made earlier reference to Durkheim’s functionalism and how it affected and contributed to the field of anthropology and sociology. Furthermore, Kingsbury and Scanzoni (2009) expanded the theory by describing types of coping mechanisms found under



structural functionalism and how they serve the purpose of maintaining and preserving the harmony or 'equilibrium' of society.

Bredemeir (1995), Chilcott (1988), Turner (1979) and Sato (2011) explained the nature of structural functionalism and its application in brief. The discussions also commended the merit of how structural functionalism is one of the easy to be understood by scholars and professionals, yet still able to offer rich findings of data. Furthermore, Tuner made a further remark on the trending of structural functionalism usage among scholars. Eventually, it is found and suggested that the theory is now becoming prominent back in the academic world despite it was initially developed and pioneered in 1930's.

Holmwood (2004) made further explanation and exploration of the argument, of having and using structural functionalism in conducting research and studies. The same idea has also been discussed by Barnard (2017) as he strengthened the advantages of using structural functionalism by using an analogy of how society is like an organism, made up of many and different similar and different cells. In detail, Mahner and Bunge (2001) discussed the idea and philosophy of functionalism both from pure sciences and social sciences perspectives, complementing how the theory as a research tool allows the academic field and researchers to understand a phenomenon better.

Research conducted by Karki and Gartoulla (2015) applied structural functionalism in an attempt to understand the HIV transmission phenomenon. The phenomenon was found to be related to many variables and factors, thus the theory was justified to be used as it works in understanding social institutions organically and holistically. This advocated that structural functionalism suits to be used when it comes to research that involves many variables, just as this proposed research. Another close example and application of structural functionalism is research done by Awuawuer (2018) where the researcher attempted to see the relationship and the effects of home-frown African dance tradition in contributing to and shaping the positive transformation of society. Awuawuer made positive remarks from the study by claiming how the dance tradition does serve as an instrument for integration and nation-building, social development, national identity, economic development and empowerment, social consciousness, mobilization and therapy.

Thus, it can be concluded that structural functionalism suits the aim of the study which is to see and investigate the social phenomena among the research subject, which is to see the correlation between the constituent mechanisms in achieving the greater good for all which is the state of 'equilibrium' or stability and solidarity so that the community would not fall apart. If something happens to affect or disrupt the flow of the system, society must either react to it either by adjusting, adapting, or resisting. Been

said that the Mah Meri oral tradition itself contains many stories and lores to begin with, in which each of them has the embodiment of its tenets. These tenets have both direct and indirect relations with the Mah Meri people. Therefore, by applying this theoretical and conceptual framework, we would be able to understand how oral tradition tenets affect and influence the Mah Meri people and their livelihood. Similar approaches may even be applied to the other Orang Asli communities in Malaysia peninsular too since different Orang Asli groups have their own different culture, lores and oral tradition.

It also seems that structural functionalism suits in an attempt of studying both the people and society with the culture and tradition. Hence, not to be forgotten that the aim of using this theory is to justify how the selected features or constituent mechanisms of the people serve, and have purposes for the people. Whether the answer is yes or no, the theory will further attempt to investigate the hows and the why. In this context, it is the Mah Meri's oral tradition as the constituent mechanism and its influence towards the people back.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

By studying oral tradition, it has some significance especially when it comes to understanding communities better and deeper. Generally, oral tradition and folklore of a community instill moral values in its people and community so these values can be followed and practised in their daily lives (Rahim 2014). Lozica (2018) quoted Solar (1976) by saying that any form of literature including oral literature such as folklore carries literary values which are only attainable by "contacting with the works directly" such as reading, reciting, or performing it. These attainable values however cannot be achieved by merely undergoing scholarly thought and analysis, as said by Lozica that "experience is individual and subjective, and literary values are also individual and subjective". So, the readers, spectators or audiences do not generate or construct the literary values by themselves, but perhaps they find and discover the literary values that are already embodied in the work. Hence why as mentioned by Solar, it is by default that literature can be seen as its specific literary values, subject to the era, period and genre. However, when it comes to folklore, the argument turns otherwise. As explained by Solar, oral or spoken literature like folklore is unique as its essence corresponds, reflects and reacts with the people and society, which is different from written literature.

It is also interesting to discuss how Dorji (2010) highlight some importance of oral tradition such as folktales, myths and legends. Dorji argued that regardless of region and civilization, oral tradition plays important roles in the community, as it is strongly related to the respective local history, landforms and place names. Furthermore, Dorji used an example of

Bhutanese folklore to highlight how it is widely known and accepted that these types of folklore played an important role in educating young people and generations within the community before the era of technology and entertainment. Oral traditions were direct sources of values for education and also for entertainment for society before the era of technology and digitalization comes in. Additionally, it is still served the purpose in traditional rural societies as folklore does hold the extract of the authentic culture, values and traditions. Hence, the initial role of oral tradition and folklore in instilling values in children is supposed to be preserved. Nhamani (2014) supported this argument by discussing how folklore promotes good listening skills, ability, perseverance and endurance among children, besides working as an instruction for society in promoting poetic justice and preventing communal vices.

Moving on, Dorji (2010) highlighted a few points on how folklore plays important roles within the community. Folklore stimulates positive behaviours in the community, in certain ways and certain directions. It encourages good thoughts and intentions within society, just as how as a religion does. Almost all folklore regardless of the genres, races, cultures, regions and civilizations have similar echoes, themes and features. Henceforth, it is not surprising to find that some civilizations see folklore as a belief or a religion itself. Next, Dorji also highlighted how folklore establishes the sense of obedience to parents or filial piety. This is one of the most common themes that can be found within the folklore, especially in the Eastern folklore and oral tradition where parents are expected to be obeyed faithfully. Furthermore, Bonney (2016) mentioned how folklore in general promotes these similar patterns and values such as good overcomes evil, the importance and role of the family, appropriate sex roles and perhaps also the familiar theme that is found which is appearances can be deceiving.

Dorji also pointed out how oral tradition promotes the idea of the karmic law of cause and effect. Oral tradition provides not only insight but also serves as a form of warning to its community that every decision made has an effect. Good intentions are to be countered back with good things, rewards or incidents, and vice versa just as how bad intentions are to be countered back with bad things, rewards or incidents. This trait serves as a control of the community's behaviour in maintaining its harmonious state and being. This particular point brings us to the next argument which is oral tradition also does promote loving-kindness and compassion.

Oral tradition is not only positively impact these particular features. It also does help the community in defining a relationship with nature. Local stories, taboos, legends and myths build superstitious beliefs among the people which in some ways also help them to perceive and define their relationship with nature. Thus, people respect and appreciate nature more in certain ways as they believed that they have strong roots and connection with nature, either by believing that some superstitious entities are embodied,

living or protecting nature, or perhaps also to see that nature is a form of representation of their ancestors that should be respected (Dorji 2010). Thus, this allows them to make sense of their environments and surroundings as well.

Additionally, Dorji also highlighted how these controlled behaviours resulted from believing the folklore also could potentially help in protecting the water sources, as it is most common to find the association and connection between the source of water such as rivers, lakes or swamps with superstitious entities too. Affecting the water sources unnecessarily could result in any unwanted phenomenon that could happen to them. Water sources are not the only beneficiaries of sustaining folklore within a community, as Dorji also believed that the strong connection and association between folklore with local history and beliefs could preserve the identity and history of the community.

Interestingly, Evans (2010) also supported and argued for the importance of folklore and oral tradition in a community. He stated that the personal and national values of a people can be found in these, as there is a significant relationship between oral tradition and the values expressed by the community. Most often than not, a story always does help in answering questions of identity and values, both historically and culturally. Using Bhutan's folklore and its national values assessment, Evans explained how the coexistence of these two capitals has some correlations to each other. As mentioned by Rahim (2014), and Bausch (1999) as cited by Evans (2010), they concluded that humanity without its story has lost its soul, hence, all types of oral tradition play a purpose in preserving and prolonging the traditions embodied within the community, which also sustaining the community's identity. Folklore, oral tradition or local lores serve as a safety net whenever a community is in trouble, and the community will always return to the origin, the traditional stories and practices as a form of mechanism and practice of healing, in gaining back a sense of who were they in the past, what make them great in the present, and where is the direction they are heading towards to. Hence, these stories and oral traditions contribute to the sense of one's identity and community. It is applicable to accept that oral tradition is tied together and integrated with one's history, culture, lands, languages, stories, heritages, and identities. By simply challenging one of these attributes, the other also could be affected thus disturbing the harmony or equilibrium of the society. Oral tradition links one to their roots and gives an identity, and as it's transmitted from one to another, it becomes the continuing and living thread that links the generations.

On the other side, some scholars like Bonney (2016) pointed out how oral tradition could significantly be utilised as an educational feature in transmitting cultural traditions, values, and histories to the next generation. Bonney also mentioned that these attributes also can be seen in Western culture, civilization and folklore to be precise like "Hansel and Gretel" and

“Little Red Riding Hood”. These folklores share the same and similar universal themes and values, thus contributing to the shaping of the Western community and their features. In the Malaysia context on the other side, Rahim (2014) stated that the purposes of having oral tradition or folklore to the early community were entertainment and pleasure, satisfaction, teaching and learning, and historical purposes like naming places. Pang et al.(2014) also claimed that the oral myths and stories of the Mah Meri people are important in preserving the customs and culture while at the same time educating the moral values to young generations.

Hence, the benefits and significance of folklore and oral tradition studies are justified. It seems that oral tradition itself plays important roles and functions within the communities. It touches on many aspects and stages of the community's being and cycle. Concluding these literature surveys stated, this research aims to investigate the relationship between the Mah Meri oral tradition with its people, and how it affects them from the perspective of community development. As the past literature surveys suggested that positive relationship between folklore and oral tradition with its people, this research aims to find and validate this relationship, hoping to spread awareness about the Mah Meri's story and background, as well as to understand them better in terms of their cores, values and essences so that suggestions on empowering, developing, and enhancing these people can be proposed in a better and refined attitude at the end of the research. Additionally, the findings also might be beneficial for JAKOA to create and promote rules, regulations, programmes and policies regarding the development of the indigenous communities in Malaysia.

### **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

This section discusses and points out the limitation of the research. It is important to point out the limitations of the study as a perimeter in conducting and executing the research. Furthermore, the limitations outlined could help research not only in understanding and arguing data but also help when it comes to the conclusion and synthesizing the findings with suggestions for future studies and research.

When it comes to the subject of the research, this research focuses on the indigenous people of Malaysia who are commonly known and recognized as Orang Asli or 'Original People' (Werner, 1997). The Orang Asli is selected as the subject of this research and limitation as it is found from the literature survey that Orang Asli people have unique and authentic cultures that have the potentials to be explored and studied deeper than the existing literature. Moreover, the fact that there are eighteen identified tribes and ethnicities of Orang Asli in Malaysia indicates the varieties and richness of these people that could offer numerous options and opportunities for scholars to execute



research and studies. This is hopefully to give back the Orang Asli benefits in return, specifically in the area of empowering back the Orang Asli people, regardless of the aspects and features.

Moving on, the second limitation layer of this research is to cap the study only to the people of Mah Meri from all the eighteen Orang Asli ethnics in the peninsular of Malaysia. This specific choice is due to several variables. Firstly is due to the location wise. As the researcher and the supervisory committee are both from and based in Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Selangor, the saturated location for the Mah Meri people which is at the western part and coast of the Selangor state is justified. The distance which is Pulau Carey is approximately 55.3 kilometres away from Universiti Putra Malaysia or UPM and is easily accessible by road. The merit also goes to the Mah Meri's unique practice which is their wooden carvings and statues, inspired by their oral tradition. There are only two ethnicities of Orang Asli that have this kind of practice. Other than Mah Meri people, the Jah Hut people also do the same, however, location-wise, they are based in the state of Pahang, even further than the distance of UPM to Pulau Carey itself.

These arguments highlight an idea of how the belief of a society could potentially empower them in many ways. Hence, the third limitation of this research is focusing only on the community development aspects, features and values that existed within the people. Community development is a discipline of understanding, analysing, and synthesizing people which leads to the creating and suggesting methods of empowering them back. The main idea is about profiling the definition of a community; basically in knowing and understanding more about their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Another stage of community development after this phase is the practical part which is about developing and proposing empowerment plans subject to the selected particular areas and executing the plan accordingly. These phases are important in proposing any empowerment idea and plan in the future, especially for the Mah Meri people.

The final layer of limitation for this research is regarding the oral tradition of Mah Meri people. As the research will be focusing on the community development values within the community, there is a perimeter set by research to focus more on the specific cluster and feature of the Mah Meri people, which is the oral tradition of the people. The main justification for this selection and perimeter is because it is found that the Mah Meri people, just as the other communities are hugely and closely influenced by their belief system. However, for the Orang Asli of Malaysia, the belief system is as sacred and important as a religion would. For the Mah Meri people, their oral tradition is their belief system and it influences every single cluster and aspect of their lives. Having their oral tradition or their belief system as a perimeter in profiling, understanding, analysing, validating and verifying the values of the Mah Meri people, this final limitation also helps the research

to be executed in a more proper way and ethics ,with better focus and direction.



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