

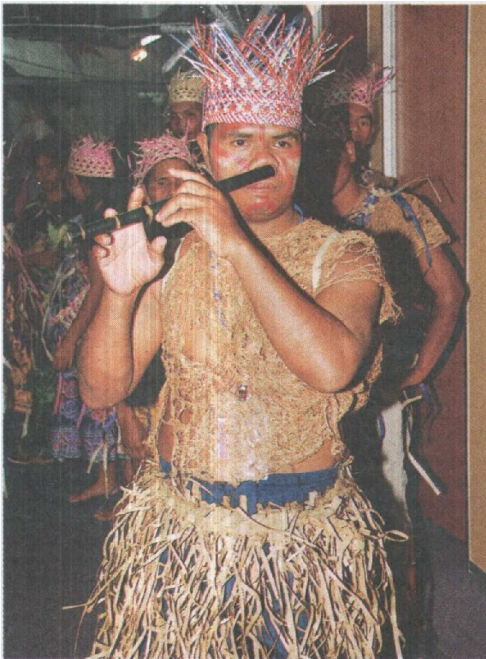
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# Nisra giving back to his people



Nisra Nisran Asra Ramlan, deputy director-general (development), Orang Asli Affairs Department



Sali Bah Nap, head of the Bah Bola sewing performance group, blowing the *seruling* (flute).



Dental services are provided for the natives

YEARS ago, everything that Nisra Nisran Asra Ramlan @ Angit needed – from slippers to pails, school uniforms and education – was provided for.

Today, the 33-year-old took on a role reversal.

He is now the man in charge of making sure developmental projects, worth hundreds of million ringgit, benefit the lives of the natives the same way his had been aided.

For now, Nisra is the No 2 man in the Orang Asli Affairs Department.

Looking at how the well built deputy director-general switches effortlessly between English and Bahasa Malaysia, as he talks about his role from his 10th floor office in Ampang, it's hard to imagine his humble beginnings as an Orang Asli child.

Nisra, a Temiar, grew up in the remote Kampung Bihai in Gua Musang, Kelantan – an area so secluded that it takes three days on foot or six hours in a four-wheel drive to reach.

Unlike most Orang Asli children, Nisra did not spend his entire childhood at the village in the forest.

His father, who worked in the department, uprooted the family to the fringes and settled all his six children in primary schools, followed by boarding schools.

"My father was a very open minded man. He would not have me live in the kampung because I'd be influenced by my peers and follow their folks into the jungle.

"My father wanted us to get an education."

Nisra pursued accounting in Universiti Putra Malaysia on a public scholarship.

Then, he worked for six years as an auditor in a private firm and qualified as the first Orang Asli Chartered Accountant before being offered a partnership in the same company in 2002. He declined.

"Back in those days, I visited my kampung every year and I still saw a lack in everything – water supply and electricity. I felt that I really had to

help, but as an auditor, I worked long hours especially during the tax season."

So, Nisra resigned and joined the department as a director, taking a pay cut and shouldering added responsibilities at the same time.

This year, he was entrusted with a RM107 budget for the healthcare, physical and non-physical development of the peninsula's natives.

It's a stigma, he said, to think that if Orang Asli join the government, they can work only in this department.

"Our achievement is not confined to here. I want to see Orang Asli achieve more than as a director of the department.

"I don't consider myself successful. I'm not an icon. I know of an Orang Asli engineer working for an oil and gas company in the United States. To me, that is quite an achievement."

Another commonly held perception is that the Orang Asli should be left alone to lead their lives, said Nisra, who now visits his village monthly.

"People ask me, why does the department bother with Orang Asli? They say, maybe

the Orang Asli are not very keen to be like the other races, and that they are comfortable with their life.

"If they asked me this 20 years ago, I'd say that's right because during those times, Orang Asli could get everything they needed from the jungle.

"But now, as development encroaches into their settlements, where can they get food and unpolluted resources? How can they eat rice? They have to buy.

"If we take up the policy not to interfere with their life, I think that's very wrong. I predict that 20 years on, the Orang Asli won't be able to sustain themselves if they don't receive development aid from the government."

Brought on by development also are modern-day medical conditions and social ills inflicting the natives, such as heart problems, HIV/AIDS, prostitution, alcoholism and drug abuse, said

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Nisra.

"TB and leprosy is on a downward trend. I'm more worried about modern diseases. The HIV rate among Orang Asli is disturbing me."

According to him, 40 out of 100 people infected by HIV/AIDS have died.

This figure is not even 0.1 per cent of the total Orang Asli population, but because the cases are on the rise, Nisra is worried.

These problems were unheard of until only about 10 years ago, he said.

The department will be meeting up with the police and Health Ministry to tackle the drug menace, which is the main form of HIV transmission in the community.

Each year, RM25 million is spent on education and RM2 million on mind development projects, such as motivational talks to instil good values.

"Education made me who I am today. I don't believe economic aid as a factor for my community's success. Education is what pulls people out of the poverty cycle.

"We try our best to balance the physical with human development. Our clients are people. We tackle Orang Asli problems and issues from cradle to grave.

It's not easy.

"Our goal is to develop the Orang Asli to be at the same level as the mainstream community without them losing their identity. Maybe 20-30 years later, we can close this department."