

Headline	See the forest, and the trees		
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Bateq in the frame

An outdoor photo exhibition in Kuala Lumpur's Taman Tugu celebrates the unique identity and culture of the Bateq, a small Orang Asli population of nomadic hunter-gatherers, scattered across Pahang and Kelantan. >2

Photo: MAHEN BALA

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See the forest, and the trees

Two young Malaysians blaze a trail with their *Ceb Bah Hep* photo exhibit set in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, giving you more than just a bird's eye view of the Bateq Orang Asli community.

By ANN MARIE CHANDY
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NESTLED in the forest trail at the Taman Tugu Nursery in Kuala Lumpur's city centre, is a humble outdoor photo exhibition with the lofty ambition of celebrating the unique identity and culture of the Bateq Orang Asli, a small population of nomadic hunter-gatherers, scattered across Pahang and Kelantan.

Humble, because it offers just 12 photos and has been mostly put together by two young men – photographer/filmmaker Mahen Bala and project manager Zarif Ismail. Lofty, because (arguably) most Malaysians' knowledge of the Bateq Orang Asli is probably limited to the recent spate of deaths from a mysterious disease (later revealed as measles) that ravaged the communities of Kuala Koh in Kelantan.

To expect locals to celebrate, let alone care for, this community which for thousands of years survived off the forest, moving their settlements according to the seasons, is perhaps optimistic at best.

But Mahen and Zarif are enthusiastic, and their intentions are noble.

"It is disheartening to see how we have normalised the idea of exploiting everything around us to quench an insatiable greed, while disguising it as progress," says Mahen.

"Every acre of rainforest we clear will only tighten the noose around our children's future. The Bateq offer us an alternative way of framing our relationship with the environment. There is so much we can learn from them."

Mahen, in his 30s, is self-taught and enjoys working with different mediums including photography,

filmmaking and writing. Born in Pahang, he grew up in Cameron Highlands and Kuantan, and shifted to KL about 10 years ago. Quiet and unassuming, it is only after he begins to speak about a subject close to his heart that his passion comes out of hiding.

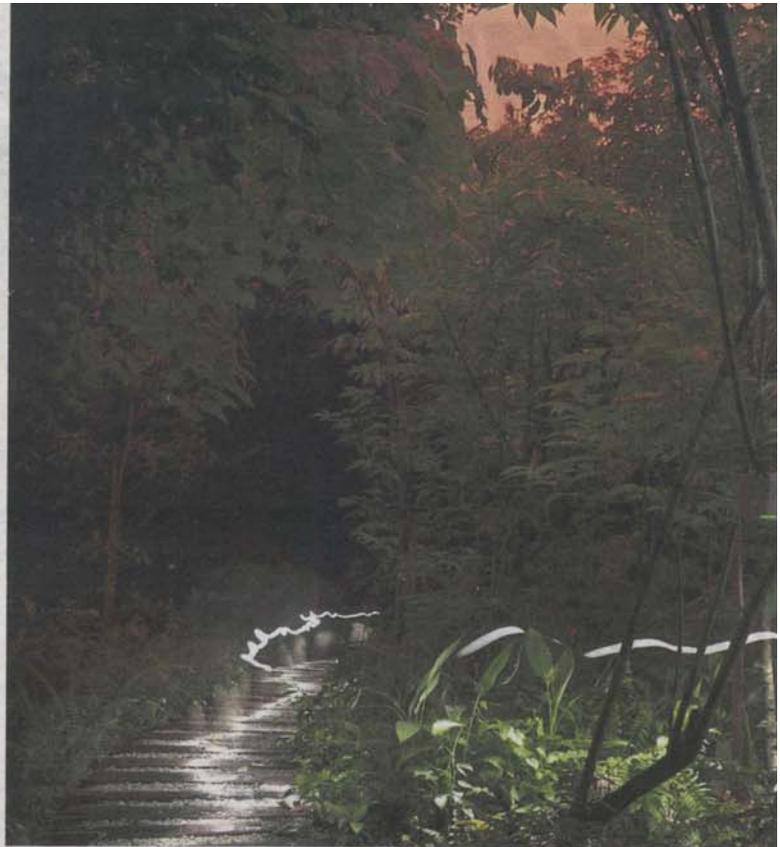
The photo exhibition has been warmly billed *Ceb Bah Hep*, which in Bateq means "into the forest".

Mahen explains: "In the morning if you ask the Bateq where they are going, they will respond 'Ceb Bah Hep', if you have an ailment and you need a remedy, the answer again is 'Ceb Bah Hep' ... going into the forest is the one universal answer to all of their problems, because it governs their entire life. That's why I decided the exhibition needed to be called *Ceb Bah Hep* and also why instead of putting all of these photographs in a nice air-conditioned gallery with white walls, we thought it should be in a forest."

The concept of the *Ceb Bah Hep* exhibition makes for a unique viewing experience. The photographs are printed on semi-transparent material and mounted on transparent acrylic, giving them a soft glow when struck by sunlight during the day, and with light at night.

"It was important for us that the narrative of the Bateq people be told within a relevant environment, and Taman Tugu was the perfect place," he says, adding that he doesn't quite know how many photos were taken in total. He began editing them down once they had secured a location for the exhibition.

Mahen's team – including Adrian Wong, who provides tech support with the cameras – spent about a week in a small Bateq settlement along Sungai Tembeling in Taman



It was important that the exhibit's narrative of the Bateq people be told within a relevant environment, and Taman Tugu in KL serves as the perfect place. – Photos: MAHEN BALA

Negara in Pahang in February. They worked together with scholar Nurul Fatanah, who specialises in researching the Bateq and has worked extensively with the community for many years.

"While access was made a lot easier thanks to Nurul, there remained a lot of obstacles when it came to communicating with the people," admits Mahen.

"Many times they see no reason to talk."

The photos portray the Bateq people in their day-to-day lives – an aerial view of the glorious Sungai Tembeling, children bathing in the river and learning to weave, a young man with his blowpipe, menfolk communing around a fire, sharing stories, an elder and children waiting for the arrival of tourists – each photograph is a documentation of the way of life, but also presents Mahen's hope for

these humble people, who are slowly but surely losing their identity not just because they are being forced to integrate with mainstream society and capitalised on by tourist guides out to make a quick buck, but also because the virgin forests are swiftly disappearing (logging operations and development schemes) and the Bateq can no longer "Ceb Bah Hep".

"By taking away the forests, we are denying them their way of life," Mahen laments, and explains why this exhibition materialised.

"Photography for me is a medium to document, contextualise, and inquire, never to entertain," he says.

"I am not interested in aesthetically pleasing photographs taken for the sake of being attractive. Visuals play a very important role in how we understand the world and with that in mind, I wanted to

explore new ways not only for us to visualise the Orang Asli, but for them to visualise themselves. The people I photograph must be able to look at photographs of themselves and feel empowered."

But executing the outdoor exhibition had its set of challenges.

The photographer shares: "Apart from figuring out a way to hang the prints in place securely, the elements (sun and rain) were quite challenging. Some visitors have expressed concern that the prints are being damaged by the rain, but that's perfectly fine. It is the subject of the photograph that is important, not the object itself."

A broader scope

Ceb Bah Hep is part of a larger project called the Elders of Our Forest (EOF), which began in June 2018 when Mahen was awarded a



'Many times they see no reason to talk,' says Mahen about his time with the Bateq Orang Asli community in Sungai Tembeling, Pahang.



The team behind the multimedia project titled *Elders Of Our Forest* (from left) Zarif, Mahen, Adam (from Tropical Rainforest Conservation and Research Centre) and Adrian Wong (technical support for camera).

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grant by the Inxo Arts Fund.

This photo exhibition is one of the components within the larger project, which is a Virtual Reality platform offering a multi-faceted journey into the Malaysian rainforest. The first component looks at trees within the Royal Belum rainforest in Perak, the second explores the relationship between people and these rainforests, in the city.

Taman Tugu became the perfect model for us to study – how we can preserve the rainforest and how people can continue to interact with it in different ways,” Mahen shares with a group of about 30 people before leading us on a little trail through the nursery at dusk on a recent Saturday to view his handiwork, and listen to his tales of the Bateq folk.

The third part of the EOF project

is a documentary on the Bateq in Taman Negara. To achieve this rather monumental task, Mahen and Zarif have been working with NGOs, institutions, and agencies involved in researching, and conserving our tropical landscape. The larger aim is to introduce the concept of using VR and technology in curating art exhibitions and setting up small-scale independent museums.

“After we had completed the first two components, I felt there was an opportunity to explore a more direct relationship between people and the rainforest. During our first exhibition at KongsilKL last year, we met Nurul who shared with us about her ongoing work with the Bateq people. They were the last remaining group of OA who lead a nomadic lifestyle.”



The Ceb Bah Hep photographs are printed on semi-transparent material and mounted on transparent acrylic, giving them a soft glow when struck by sunlight during the day, and with light at night.

By this time they had already spent most of their budget, but the urgency of documenting the Bateq way of life was too important to pass up, and so using their own funds, they extended the project with a trip to Taman Negara.

The trip was well worth it, as Mahen came away with a treasure trove of tales and visuals.

Zarif, also, is enjoying the journey.

He says: “Working with Mahen has been a treat and I am forever grateful that he approached me to start Elders of Our Forest together. Most of the time I think our ideas gel together so the journey has been smooth so far. I think it’s also important that both of us share somewhat similar values when it comes to approaching a topic that we would like to cover so that helps. At times he can appear like a grumpy old man, I do value his perspective not only when we discuss work but also on topics such as life and South-East Asia history. Personally, I am learning a lot from him.”

Zarif, 29, was born in Kedah, but grew up in Perlis. He did his masters in communications and journalism in Melbourne, Australia, and has worked with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Cambodia and the WWF-Tigers Alive Initiative based in KL. As producer for EOF, he contributes to setting the direction for each new phase of the project, reach out to potential collaborators, and manage the publicity.

“My interest with Elders of Our Forest came naturally as I have always been interested in topics of

nature and people,” says Zarif.

“Our current mission at Elders of Our Forest is to explore and share the beautiful rainforests and landscapes that we have in Malaysia. But in the medium to long term, we are also working towards bringing the project to other countries in South-East Asia. South-East Asia was once far more fluid and interconnected in terms of identity, culture, movement of people, and borders, so I would love to highlight our region’s common threads through our work.”

Mahen adds that EOF is an ongoing project.

“We are looking at developing educational modules to bring the rainforest into classrooms, museums, institutions. Earlier this year, the project was also selected as part of the American Film Showcase programme organised by the US Embassy and I was selected as one of five international VR filmmakers to attend the SXSW Conference in Austin, Texas,” he says.

For now, however, their focus is set on the 12 pictures of the raw, real life of the Bateq juxtaposed against the lush backdrop of the forest at Taman Tugu; pictures they hope will provoke thought and inspire change.

The Ceb Bah Hep photo exhibition is on daily at Taman Tugu (Nursery Trail) till July 21, from 7am to 6.30pm. Admission is free. On July 14, there will be a special night trail with Mahen Bala and Zarif Ismail from 8pm to 9pm. Register at “Elders of Our Forests” on Facebook.

Did you know?

1 The main purpose of Ceb Bah Hep in Taman Negara was to shoot a 360° documentary, so Mahen Bala and team used an Insta360 Pro camera which records video in 8K. They also used drones to capture aerial footage, and sound recorders to capture interviews and sounds of the forest.

Keep your eyes peeled for the documentary, which is still a work in progress.

2 In partnership with the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, up to 1,000 trees within Taman Tugu’s Nursery have been identified and tagged for preservation. These include indigenous species such as Jelutung, Tembusu, Pulai, and Gahanu, some measuring more than 1m in diameter and potentially over 100 years old.

Take time to appreciate the wonders of these magnificent trees when you “ceb bah hep”.

3 The Bateq people bury their dead by wrapping the deceased in tree bark and rattan and placing the body high up in a tree, lighting a fire below to keep animals away. They believe that the spirit of the dead will then be able to fly up to heaven.

Look out for the photo in the Ceb Bah Hep exhibition that depicts this ancient ritual.