Transcoding Intangible Heritage: The Folklore Stories of Malaysia

Delas Santano
Centre for Research-Creation in Digital Media
School of Arts, Sunway University
Bandar Sunway, Malaysia
delas.santano@gmail.com

Abstract— **In this article, preserving folklore stories in Malaysia via audio visual medium is discussed. As part of the intangible heritage, this traditional knowledge faces the challenges in this digital internet-driven age. Case study implementation for the Mah Meri folklores and the Iban and Pua Kumbu is presented and analyzed.**

Keywords—intangible heriage, folklore, Malaysia, Mah Meri, Dayak, Sarawak, Borneo, audiovisual.

I. INTRODUCTION

Folklore is understood as an expression of a traditional knowledge with a range of materials from tales, speech, songs, dances and customs, to name a few [1]. Folk is commonly understood as group of everyday life and lore as a cultural learning and expression. This folklore term covers a range of topics from speech, tales, songs, dances and customs, to name a few. Folklore stories are mostly passed on from one generations to the next through the word of mouth. Grandmothers telling the stories to the grand children or mothers and fathers giving the bedtime stories to their kids. These stories often have a meaningful message for the audience. Sometimes a message to remind people of mannerism, social values and or even stories of a certain history or tradition in a specific culture. The thread that connects folklore is the traditional cultural values that it carries. As such, it falls within the domain of intangible heritage as defined by UNESCO [2].

The challenge to this intangible heritage, the stories, is fading to the brink of disappearance. These unique "mediums" that the they are using to tell and preserve the stories is a great tool that also represents their culture. But the stories itself may die, as the storyteller may passed on. If the generations that continues the work doesn't embrace the stories as part of the craft, then the soul of the craft itself may disappear. Not only that, the interest level of the young generations to these folklore stories are diminishing as with the worlds' technological advancement, children nowadays are "visual" thirsty generations. This makes the preservation of the folklore stories a challenge.

Initially, 2 previous research projects which were exhibited involved content on folklore stories with the researcher involved in content production of the said stories. The two projects were on Mah Meri Indigenouse people in Carey Island, Selangor and the Iban of Sarawak and their Pua Kumbu craft. Uniquely both of this groups have an inherited story that ties very closely with their craft, namely the mask and statue carving by the Mah Meri and the Pua Kumbu weaving by the Iban women. This particular participation in these 2 projects that initiated the research interests of the researcher in this topic. Drawing from professional experience as an Audiovisual Producer, the researcher finds that the delivery or distribution method of these stories could play a role in preserving them, and having a greater impact to the public.

For the Mah Meri and Pua Kumbu exhibitions, a story room was devised as the media to deliver the animatics stories, whereby a 65-inch flat screen TV was placed to playback the stories.

In this paper, we present on findings of transcoding 2 folklore stories from the Mah Meri indigenous people and the Iban of Sarawak [3]. Visual development and storytelling format will be discussed as to receive feedback on the method chosen to transcode the stories into, with future audiovisual format to be considered as part of the transcoding and preservation of these unique folklore stories in Malaysia.

The research aims to start the study of folklore stories in Malaysia, whereby the country consists of various ethnic communities from Malay, Chinese, Indian, Orang Asli, Kadazandusun (Sabah) and Dayak (Sarawak). From this research, we can then identify the theme of each community's story, the meaning and cultural values, the symbolism or metaphor it uses and its existence today in this fast globalizing digital world. The research aims preserve these folklore stories in a visually innovative digital medium for the future of the culture and community. Selecting some of the unique stories from each culture, we then transcode that into a visual interpretation of them after an in depth understanding of the stories and giving it fair treatment in transcoding those folklore

stories into a form that can be widely accessible and easily understood.

Various forms of audiovisual storytelling is to be applied to the folklore stories as a way of giving it a new medium with a view of preserving them. Augmented reality, virtual reality, projection mapping, immersive storytelling is aimed to be explored for the long-term plan of this research.

II. THE STORIES

A. The Mah Meri Stories

In the case of the Mah Meri indigenous people of Malaysia, their folklore stories are embedded in their traditional craft of wooden masks that are carved by hand. This mask carving is a unique heritage of the Mah Meri culture [4]. Stories range from across nature, animals and ancestors, and are portrayed in the masks by the carvers. These masks are often used in prayer rituals such as the "Hari Moyang" and the "Puja Pantai" [5].

From the Peter Crowe's catalog of Mah Meri Masks, we identified 2 stories that resides in the a Statue and a Mask. Peter Crowe has documented the stories of each Mah Meri masks and statues [6]. From that stories, we interviewed the Mah Meri carvers to retell the stories from what they recollect of it. The source from the book became the starting point to initiate the Mah Meri folklore stories. We then cross checked the stories in the book with the version directly from the carvers. There were some minor differences, but most of the story line and characters are consistent.
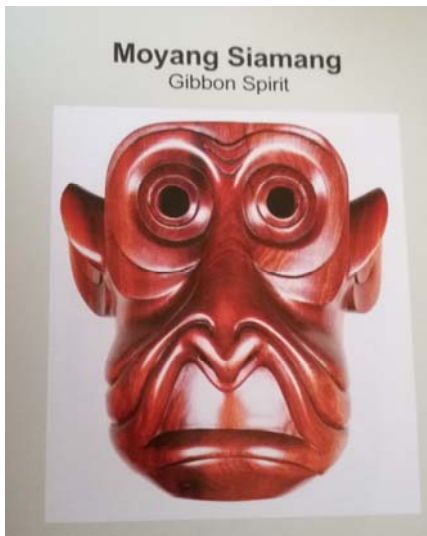

Fig. 1. Snapshot of Moyang Siamang (Gibbon Spirit) from Peter Crowe's book.

There was a different name for the sea spirit as mentioned by the carver, Samri. From his recollection, its name is Moyang Ba'ai, instead of Moyang Bidai. The reason for this mismatch is yet to be investigated, as it could have been caused by different interpretation from the translation of the stories. As the researcher found during interviews with Samri in Bahasa, there were some words that was specific in Mah Meri language has a different synonym in the Malay language.

Fig. 2. Snapshot of Moyang Ba'ai (Sea Spirit) from Peter Crowe's book.

Fig. 3. Snapshot of interview with Samri

For the purpose of this research article and developing the proof of concept, these two stories from the Mah Meri culture are chosen to be transcoded into an animatics for an immersive story room. The finalized story for transcoding is listed below.

Fig. 4. Interview whilst Samri was carving the masks.

Moyang Siamang (Gibbon Spirit)

A man was hunting in the forests where he accidentally killed a gibbon with this blowpipe. Killing a gibbon is bad sign for the Mah Meri people. A disaster then struck. A thunderstorm clouds the village for 7 days 7 nights. The man was then told by the elders in the village, to replace what he has killed.

He was advised to carve the gibbon from the soft wood pulai, and not to use the hard wood. Tradition says that the after carving the gibbon's face on the pulai, they are to throw it back to the forests and it will decay over time. As it is a bad omen if the carved gibbon masks to be found by anyone else.

Once it has been replaced, the spirit will know that the hunter has replaced what he has killed with the mask carving. If he does not replace it with the mask, he will be in debt to the spirit and gets a disease that has no cure.

Moyang Ba'ai (Sea Spirit)

There was a girl, crying while she sits in the swing by the tree. Days gone by and she sits there and cries every day. A man then passes by and asks her why she cries. She says that she because she will not be here anymore as she will be sacrificed to the sea spirit.

The man then went to a tree stump, where he found a long knife. He the sharpened the knife and wrapped it with 7 fold of pinang betel (sireh) leaves. He later went to the sea, while all the other villagers were running away. The sea spirit was there about to take the girl. The man then jumps and stabs the sea spirit with the knife. He then slashed the head of the sea spirit leaving it dead. The girl turns out to be Tok Batin's daughter. She was about to be sacrificed to the sea spirit as part of ancestral custom that sacrificed virgins in the village when the sea spirit comes.

B. The Pua Kumbu Stories of the Iban in Sarawak

For the Iban tribe of Sarawak in East Malaysia, their folklore stories are embedded in the traditional weaving of Pua Kumbu, a textile craft of the Iban women traditionally made in the longhouses deep in the Sarawak rainforests. This beautiful woven textile ranges in size from as small as an A4 paper to as large as a blanket, since the name Pua is translated as blanket. Within this textile the weaver tells the story through the use of symbols that depict the characters in their story woven into the Pua. Thus the Pua name, in Iban, also reflects the story of that particular weaving. [7]

We focused on the origins of Pua Kumbu story for the purpose of the prototype development. This particular story on the origins of how pua kumbu started as a weaving used as media to tell these stories. This story was shared from a collaboration with Dr. Welyne Jeffrey Jehom, an anthropologist in Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences University Malaya. She researched the story from interviews with the Master weaver of Pua Kumbu, who was 70 years old at the time and the only person left that knows of this story. Part of Dr. Welyne's research is to sustain the weaving of pua kumbu for the Iban women as a source of income and preserve the heritage. This particular story, is a one of a kind version of the Origins of Pua Kumbu that is not known anywhere else.

Both the Pua Kumbu story and the Mah Meri ties the folklore story and the physical artefact.

The Origins of Pua

Once upon a time, the Iban was very closed to the gods or petara in Iban language. The origins of pua is believed by the Iban coming from an incident where an Iban man named Menggin shot and caught a bird with his blow pipe. The bird was very beautiful and caught Menggin's attention. When the bird flew very closely, sat on a branch close to Menggin, quickly he blew his blow pipe, the bird fell but what he saw on the ground was a piece of beautiful textile known as "kain kebat" in Iban. Menggin picked up the kain and kept it aside. What he didn't know was the kain belonged to Dara Tinchin Temaga, the eldest daughter of a petara known as Singalang Burong. Dara Tinchin Temaga was looking for her kain everywhere. During her search for her kain, she met Menggin and asked him if he saw any kain lying around. Menggin said "I shot a bird and it fell down as a beautiful kain" and he gave it to her. Dara Tinchin Temaga took Menggin as her husband even though she was still married and brought Menggin back to her own home, the gods home. At the time, her husband was going for an expedition to another region. Menggin and Dara Tinchin Temaga have a son, named Sera Gunting. However, a year after they have Sera Gunting, Dara Tinchin Temaga's first husband came home. She requested Menggin and their son, Sera Gunting to go back home to Iban world. Menggin and Sera Gunting were asked to wear a jacket known as baju burong and her kain that she had woven so they could travel back to the Iban world. From that day onwards, the jacket and the kain have been passed to many Iban women so they can

weave the same designs for the purpose of keeping in touch with the gods.

C. The Snake Dragon of Tasik Chini

This folklore story resides on the indigenous people in Lake Chini Pahang, Malaysia. They are the Jakun tribes who lives in the area of the Lake. Secondary data of the story was collected from the Crabtree's ethnography research on the Jakun people that was completed in 2014 [8]. The interesting part on this story, is that there are two versions of the Snake Dragon, one in the Malay community and the Jakun community. The Jakun side of the story, delves on the fact of the Snake Dragon as the protector of the lake and its ecosystem. While the Malay version talks about a love story between princesses and kingdoms that later became the myth of the Snake Dragon. With the validity of the Crabtrees research, we chose the Jakun version as the version to focus on for the prototype development. This version connects the place Lake Chini and the story.

The Snake Dragon of Lake Chini

A very long time ago, there was only the Chini river. The orang asli lived there and were padi farmers. One time a dog was barking at a tree, and a lady then wonders why the dog is barking to a tree. She stabbed the tree with her stick and a thick oil is flowing out of it. The people of the village went to the tree and tasted the oil and liking it except for a grandfather that warned his grandson to not taste the oil. As the sun went down, a storm came and water started to rise up from the ground spreading to the village. The water spread like a flood and catches and drowns the villagers who were running away. The grandfather and his grandson was spared as they did not partake in tasting the oil. It was later known that the tree was actually the snake dragon, named Sri Gummum and the lady has wounded her with her stick and the oil was the blood of the snake dragon. It is now known to the Orang Asli that the Snake Dragon is the protector of the now called lake Chini, and it brings prosperity to the land surrounding it. But today, the land around lake chini is harmed by loggings and plantation thus polluting the lake and they said that Sri Gummum has now disappeared or in hiding due to the pollution.

D. Cik Siti Wan Kembang

This story originates from Kelantan, Malaysia. A region that is near to Southern Thailand and shares some Siam history. It tells the tale of a warrior princess, Cik Siti Wan Kembang who later became an iconic symbol in Kelantan. The story was researched across multiple written sources, though none of them are academic articles. Thus, the potential mix between actual part from the folklore story and the author's interpretation. We then maintained the same elements that was repeated in the stories' versions and use it to form the basis of the story. This version is considered an adapted version of multiple sources. This story represents a connection of a historical character or symbol with the folklore story.

Cik Siti Wan Kembang

Cik Siti Wan Kembang is the daughter of King Ahmad in Kelantan. At the age of 4, she lost her father. As she grew, she was well taught in horse riding, archery and weapons. She was known as a warrior princess even with her good looks and mannerism. She rode into battles on her horse with a sword in hand and a group of woman warriors. At the age of 25, she was crowned as the Queen in the Kelantan kingdom. She was fair and wise ruler. During her reign, afraid of attacks on the palace, she moved the kingdom from Mount Cinta Wangsa to Tegayong, now called Ketereh. It was told that she received a deer as a gift. She loved the animal so much that she used the deer as a symbol on coins at that time and later as the state's symbol. She adopted Princess Saadong as she was unmarried. She wed Princess Saadong with King Abdullah to rule the kingdown. Cik Siti Wan Kembang then went back to Mount Cinta Wangsa and disappeared with no one ever heard of her fate afterwards.

III. THE PROTOTYPE

At the time of the writing, we managed to develop the prototype animatics for 2 stories and 2 different delivery technique, projection mapping and large screen TV. Cik Siti Wan Kembang and Snake Dragon of Tasik Chini prototype animatics and delivery to be completed in early November 2017.

Both stories were delivered in a video format, as part of a whole exhibition one on the Mah Meri Masks and a second entitled the Textile Tales of Pua Kumbu. The design of the viewing space was a room with three wooden walls and a glass door, where the TV was mounted on one wall. The room decoration derived from the story illustrations was printed in large format wallpaper for the walls of the room, thus enveloping the audience in the visual style. The stories were looped whereby visitors can spend as much time as they want to view the stories.

salah seorang moyang terdengar mengenai keseronokan yang dialami oleh penduduk kampung
it so happened one of the moyangs heard about the fun that the villagers were having.

Fig. 5. Test Sample on Texture Paper with Watercolor Effect in Mah Meri Stories from the previous projects

Fig. 6. A concept board after convergence of elements in Pua Kumbu re-interpreted visual style

Fig. 7. Video one of the Pua Kumbu Stories

Fig. 8. Video of Story room in Textile Tales Pua Kumbu Exhibition

With three physical display areas, the Curved wall and the two Pua on the side acting as screens, the Origins of the Pua video was shown using a Projection Mapping technique comprised of three projectors (see Fig.5.). Projection mapping allowed the stories to be displayed on three "screens", enabling the characters in the story move from one area to the next, crossing the three screens as per scene's design.

Fig. 9. Three "Screen" setup for the story of Origins of Pua

Fig. 10. Video installation of "Origins of Pua" story.

The animatics uses the original story teller to narrate the story in their native language. Although the Origins of the Pua was narrated by a person outside the tribe, thus resulting in a more commercial feel. This difference resulted in two findings that could support the aim of the research. With having a authentic native language of the story as a narrator, it increases the preservation and value of the folklore story. But having an outsider who is a professional voice talent, they can narrate the story better with attractive pacing and delivery of the story's scene. Further discussion is needed for this matter to better balance preservation and the impact of this method.

IV. FUTURE WORKS

The researcher aims to dig deeper into the folklore stories by confirming the stories' authenticity by conducting interview with the community where the story supposedly originated from. As with the 2 Mah Meri stories that has been catalogued together with its artefacts, the researcher then cross-checked the stories with the carvers' version. This is key for the researcher to transcode the stories into a visual form with animatics. The researcher will then continue with validation for the rest of the stories.

Further distribution/delivery of these stories across various medias is also part of the future works the researcher aims to complete. Augmented Reality is one of those medias, where by a production of the stories in print from which later can be used in Augmented Reality application.

Virtual Reality such as 360-degree videos can be another media where the stories can take form. The researcher aims to reuse the same illustration and turning it into a 360-degree storytelling. This can immersed the target audience greatly as part of the folklore stories preservation. This could be tested with head-mounted devices or 360-degree projection.

Other forms of audio visual content delivery can be an experimental theatre or live performance projection mapping, combining plays with interactive projection. With a good collaborators, this could be a very interesting rendition of a folklore story .

One of the challenges in digital humanities lies in future exploration of the difference that digital technology can make to heritage content [9], such as this compilation of intangible heritage folklore stories that will be pursued as part of a digital humanities

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