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Tribal art offers glimpse into psyche of craftsmen

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PENANG: With artefacts such as totem poles, ritual staffs, figurines, face masks and wood carvings, a tribal art exhibition is offering visitors a glimpse into how indigenous communities in the region communicate their hopes, fears and coping strategies amidst uncertainty in the natural world.

The exhibition, titled "Spirited - Human Art of the Non-Human", is being held at the Homestead, Wawasan Open University (WOU) in George Town.

Tan Yu Kai, 27, who curated the exhibition through the lenses of humanity, approached the artworks with profound philosophical curiosity. He wants them to pose questions to the audience.

"What current inequities are revealed by examining the historical displacement of indigenous people? What have we stripped from the world? What have we lost in our gains? Are our lives fundamentally better than theirs?"

"To put it plainly, we all owe our lives, lifestyles and livelihoods to indigenous peoples, the very people that our society sidelines and exploits. People who, through creation and consumption of art, remember the ancestral knowledge, value systems and world views, could help us reclaim a way of embodying our relationship with the natural world."

Tan, formerly a research fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC, holds a Master's in Earth & Environmental Sciences and a Bachelor's degree with triple majors in Biology, Anthropology and Earth & Environmental Sciences under the Freeman-Asian Scholarship from Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

Currently pursuing a Doctorate in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Michigan, he specialises in marine mollusc macroevolution.

The tribal art exhibition is jointly organised by WOU and The George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies (GIOAS). It also displays a selection owned by tribal art collector David Goh.

The collection spans the Nusantara region, comprising art pieces from Peninsular Malaysia to Papua New Guinea. It features tribal textile pieces, *ikat*, from husband-and-wife tribal textile collectors Tan Sri Andrew Sheng and Puan Sri Dr Lim Suan Poh.

Sheng is also the chairman of GIOAS, an independent, non-profit institute within WOU that is dedicated to exploring societal ideas and complexities.

Emphasising the pursuit of peace, human prosperity, happiness, and well-being, the organisation operates without the limitations of geographical boundaries or religious affiliations.

He broached the idea of the tribal art exhibition during a visit to Goh's impressive art collection warehouse with his wife and Tan Yu Kai.

"As avid art collectors interested in tribal art, we felt it fitting to showcase these hidden gems to the public," he said.

"We realised that there are people in Penang like Goh, who loves collecting. And it is people like him who bring to life the kind of imagination, creativity and entrepreneurial energy that created Entopia, the butterfly farm in Teluk Bahang.

"Just over a year later, Tan's efforts



Goh with a display of face masks from various indigenous communities.



An 18th century Sepik ancestor figure wood carving from Papua New Guinea.

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Artefacts of indigenous communities on display at 'Spirited - Human Art of the Non-Human' exhibition



An Atoni mask from Timor-Leste.

as curator have culminated in what we witness here today."

Sheng called Wawasan Open University Sdn Bhd chairman Datuk Seri Stephen Yeap's heritage home, the Homestead that was formerly inhabited by his family, the hub of culture and arts in Penang.

In his forward for the book, *Spirited - A Human Art of the Non-Human*, Sheng touched on the century-old Homestead, saying: "This stunning and historic building will continue to host a plethora of other events - this exhibition is just one of the many more to come."

Visitors to the exhibition will have the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in each artefact, exploring the stories behind them.

The displayed art pieces include totem poles, ritual staffs, ancestral figurines, face masks, intricately designed wood carvings and a diverse collection of butterflies and beetles from various localities.

The impressive Atoni mask from Timor-Leste will also be available for viewing.

This free exhibition showcases over 30 exquisite art pieces dating from the 18th to the 20th century. Hosted at the Homestead, WOU at Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah, it is open to the public daily from 10am to 4pm until Jan 16, 2024 (closed on public holidays).



A mid-20th century ceremonial costume from Irian Jaya, Indonesia.



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