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# SUNDAY VIBES

## Native : A social enterprise featuring the Orang Aslis that's powered by friendships! - By Elena Koshy



**S**ILENTLY, Daniel Teoh and Temuan native Faizul looked on at the latter's unfinished house, with piles of bricks and equipment that Faizul had painstakingly bought little by little to build a shelter for his young family. "What would you say if we could actually build your house?" asked Teoh, finally. Faizul stared at him. How was this young Chinese boy going to help? "He thought I was crazy!" recalls Teoh, laughing.

The young civil engineering student had been visiting Kampung Sungai Lalang on the fringes of Selangor for a while trying to seek out solutions to help raise the standard of living for this reclusive community.

The Temuans are just one of the tribes of Malaysia's 200,000 indigenous Orang Asli, which loosely translates as "aboriginal people". They're the oldest inhabitants of the Malaysian peninsula, and for centuries lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers.

But, far from being valued and respected for their knowledge and way of life, the Orang Asli have been subjected in recent years to various "relocation" and "integration" programmes, which have often proved counterproductive. Despite efforts to uplift their lifestyle and assimilate them into the mainstream of modern development, the Orang Asli community remains caught unwittingly in a cycle of poverty.

For Teoh, the village offered an opportunity for him to do something that was meaningful. "I was floored when I was first exposed to their way of life. The glaring disparity between the haves and the have-nots got me wondering why the bridge between 'us' and 'them' couldn't be built," he shares, adding pointedly: "After all, we're all natives to this nation we call home."

After speaking with the Tok Batin (village head) and learning that housing issues topped their list of woes, Teoh and his university mates approached the university and managed to secure a RM50,000 grant. Faizul's house got built, and as the walls of Faizul's house rose up, the walls between the young student and the Temuan father-of-two broke down. "He became my best buddy in the village!" says Teoh, chuckling.

The friendship would eventually lead to a formation of a social enterprise designed to improve the standards of living for this community. "I got the inspiration from spending time with Faizul. What if urban visitors could experience the same kind of hospitality offered by this community while enjoying the wonderful natural setting of forests, streams and wildlife?" he muses.

Like many Orang Asli villages scattered throughout the nation, Kampung Sungai Lalang offers a vignette into the lifestyle of the once-nomadic tribe who had settled by the forest to eke out a modest living.

Yet as the tides of time goes by, many traditional Temuan ceremonies, dances, cuisine and even games seem to be fading into history as the community struggles to shed their old ways to keep up with the rest of the nation. "It's such a shame," he exclaims. Teoh wanted to showcase that and more. "We want them to take pride in their culture and traditions, and display their uniqueness to the rest of the world" he avows, adding that Native aims to do just that.

The social enterprise, the affable young man explains, was founded as a community-based tourism venture that aims to provide travellers with immersive cultural experiences hosted by the indigenous communities in Malaysia. "...and Faizul became the first from his village to lead and host our very first tour group," he adds proudly.

### SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

As an increasing number of young people today are looking for meaningfulness in their job, working at a social enterprise or non-profit organisation for a cause they're passionate about can seem attractive; even if passion sometimes doesn't pay the bills.

But once they decide they can make a difference, these enterprising youths can often change the world, and in this case, the lives of the villagers at Kampung Sungai Lalang. Through Native, 25-year-old Teoh offered a chance to raise their standard of living through ecotourism as well as give them the opportunity to bridge the gap that inadvertently exists between these often marginalised communities and the outside world.

"This journey wasn't planned," Teoh insists, smiling, before adding wryly: "It certainly doesn't quite pay the bills." Yet the up-and-coming social enterprise seems to be striking all the right notes. Native was

recently awarded a grant of SGD 20,000 by the Singapore International Foundation's (SIF) Young Social Entrepreneurs (YSE) 2019 programme, edging out other social enterprises from across the region including Singapore, Cambodia, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and India.

The 15 social enterprises, including Teoh's, were shortlisted into the seven-month programme after a four-day workshop which took place in March in Singapore. Over the next few months, they went through a mentorship with leading business professionals and experienced entrepreneurs as well as an experiential study visit in China. "It was intense," admits Teoh, recalling, "I'd applied for the YSE before, but this time I was a lot more prepared!" He was determined to get Native off the ground with the invaluable assistance provided by SIF, and as fate would have it, he won the pitch.

There are several startups like Teoh's that are committed to creating a positive impact on society by investing their resources in building a social enterprise, as it ensures a beneficial outcome for all.

Recognising the impact of such ventures, the YSE Programme seeks to inspire, equip and enable youths of different nationalities to embark on social enterprises in the region. "The SIF experience proved invaluable and gave me the building blocks to build Native into what it is today," asserts Teoh.

### VEERING OFF THE PATH

Fresh from his recent YSE success, Teoh is surprisingly a picture of awkwardness as I try to get him to pose for the camera. "What do I do?" he asks desperately. Fold your arms, stand this way, I instruct and he obliges, squinting gingerly into the camera. He's not used to being in front of the camera, he admits. Relax, I tell him. Relax, the NST photographer repeats as she trains the camera on him.

He doesn't relax. Squaring his shoulders, he stares unsmiling back at the lens. Smile, I urge. He gives a forced smile. It's not a mugshot, I comment drolly and he finally chuckles. Snap! It's done, I tell him and Teoh visibly relaxes. "I was always the awkward kid at school," he explains sheepishly as we make our way to a quiet corner for a chat.

Hailing from Penang, (he's from Bayan Lepas, he tells me grinning, the not-so-popular part of Penang Island), Teoh studied civil engineering at the University of Nottingham in Semenyih. "It wasn't really my choice," he admits, with a shrug of his shoulders: "I come from a very traditional family."

As all traditional parents are keen on their offspring following the well beaten path to pursue law, engineering, accountancy or medicine, Teoh's parents were no different. All his siblings took the approved route — his eldest sister is a lawyer, his brother is a doctor and another sister is an accountant.

When it was time for Teoh to further his studies at the university, his parents sat him down and presented him with the same choices — be a doctor, lawyer, accountant or an engineer. "All that was left was engineering, so I took that up!" he quips.

But during the second year of his university, Teoh realised that civil engineering wasn't quite his cup of tea. "I was looking for something meaningful to do," he recalls. He went online, searching for things to do. "After all, I thought I still had a few years to figure things out for myself, so why not explore what else I could do to broaden my horizons?" he muses.

He discovered Epic, a social enterprise with their flagship initiative that mobilises volunteers to build homes with marginalised communities. "At that time, I wasn't too caught up with the plight of the Orang Asli," he confesses, adding: "I was just enamoured with the prospect of building a house!"

He tried to rope in his friends to come along with him on his first trip with the Epic volunteers, but "...I ended up going alone on bus ride at the break of dawn wondering what the heck did I get myself into!"

### EPIC ADVENTURE

The decision to join Epic as a volunteer, turned Teoh's life around. "I suddenly discovered that there's so much I don't know about the world!" he exclaims, adding: "I mean... if you can convince a bunch of people to get together so early in the morning and build a house in the middle of nowhere, the possibilities of doing so much more seemed endless."

The trip opened his eyes to the plight of the indigenous community who seemed to lag behind and in need of basic necessities to get by. "I was shocked to see the conditions in which they lived," he recounts, admitting: "It was the first time I'd come into contact with the Orang Asli, and a lot of questions raced in my mind. How can I do more to help?"

Brimming with ideas, Teoh returned to his university and tried to see if he could connect with the Orang Asli community living nearby. Eventually, he found a village, Kampung Sungai Lalang through one of his friends who was running a project there, but the project died a while later once funding ran out. However, Teoh kept going back to the village after that. It was there that he met Faizul and helped rebuild the latter's home while doing his final thesis before graduating.

In the meantime, Teoh continued to volunteer with Epic, and connected with its founder John-Son Oei, who later offered him a position with the social enterprise once he graduated from university. What did his parents think about him shelving more lucrative job offers for Epic? "Well they weren't happy!" replies Teoh candidly with a chuckle. "They kept wondering if I was ever going to get a 'real' job!"

Teoh joined Epic's community engagement team, and had settled to work for the social enterprise when they received an email from Airbnb who was looking to do social impact experiences, and invited Epic to collaborate with them.

### BEING NATIVE

Oei encouraged the young lad to pitch ideas and Teoh turned to his Temuan friend Faizul to ask if the latter was keen on bringing people to visit the village and the surrounding forest. "Faizul only agreed at first because he felt he was doing me a favour," reveals Teoh, adding with a chuckle: "...that's friendship for you!"

They put up the first "experiential tour" on Airbnb and charged only RM60 at that time. Teoh was pessimistic about the response but to his surprise, the tour was completely booked within the first four hours. With that first success, Native was born.

To date, the social enterprise has worked with two communities and 15 different native households, helping them grow their families' income through part-time work. They've since established a community fund, offering the entire community capital for development and what's important, Native has helped villagers recover their sense of pride in their own culture and traditions.

Native, he asserts, is on a mission to redefine what it means to be a "native". The social enterprise aims to provide a platform for both the Orang Asli and travellers alike to tell their stories, cultivate genuine relationships, learn about the different traditions in the world and their cultural strengths.

There's so much we can learn from the Orang Asli, asserts Teoh. "As a global community, we've lost our way; we've forgotten what it means to have a relationship with the land and with this wonderful community of Malaysians who has so much to offer."

To find it again, we have great guides, he says. "Indigenous people have mastered the art of storytelling, they have unparalleled knowledge of the forest and continue to teach and lead by example."

As Faizul leads yet another group of visitors into the forest (and into his world) with Teoh in tow, it's evident that the power of friendship which ignited Native will continue to create ripples that will hopefully bring communities closer together. Concluding with a smile, Teoh says: "We all share something in common... we're all natives somewhere."

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