

Troop that relied on the sixth sense

The Senoi Praaq recently stirred the imagination of Malaysians when they were involved in the search-and-rescue operation of four boys who had gone missing in the jungles of Fraser's Hill. SHANTINI SUNTHARAJAH looks into the history of the Senoi Praaq and discovers a story that's the stuff of legends.

WHEN men from the Senoi Praaq joined the team of rescuers looking for four boys — Chew Tsy Yee, 16, his brothers Tsy Han, 14, and Tsy Meng, 10, and their cousin Jeremy Teo, nine — who had gone missing in Fraser's Hill last month, hope of finding them soon was raised considerably.

Those who knew of the Senoi Praaq, which media reports described as "famed" and "legendary", felt that if anyone could find the boys, it would be them because they were reputed to be the best trackers in the country.

And sure enough, the boys were located by a group that comprised a former member of the Senoi Praaq, Rapi Bata.

The Senoi Praaq is a police unit made up almost entirely of orang asli members. The name Senoi Praaq, in the Semai language, literally means "war people" or "those who fight".

"War people" traverse the deep darkness of the rainforests that border Malaysia. They move swiftly and silently through the thick undergrowth that most others would find virtually impossible to penetrate. Their effortless progress seems to suggest that they rely on a sixth sense rather than the usual five to navigate their path.

Although many members are Senoi, one of three major orang asli groups in Malaysia, the unit is made up of orang asli from all 18 sub-ethnic tribes in the country.

One of the unit's main functions today is to secure the borders of the nation, but half a century ago the words Senoi Praaq struck fear in the heart of communist rebels in the country.

The Senoi Praaq unit was the brainchild of one R.O.D Noone, an officer in the then British-administered Malaya.

The unit was established in May 1956 and Noone became its commanding officer, serving from 1957 to 1961.

The Senoi Praaq came into being not to satisfy some casual whim of Noone's but rather to answer a pressing need, says Orang Asli Museum Director Asmawi Mohamed Yunos.

"The British formed this unit to control communist activities in the jungles of Malaya," he says.

According to historical data, he says, the British were worried when they realised communist insurgents were living in close proximity with orang asli communities in the jungle.

They were concerned that it wouldn't be long before the communists influenced these people to fight for their cause and the British wished to avoid this.

Even then, the extraordinary jungle



LEGENDARY FORCE: Asmawi explains the history of the Senoi Praaq at the Orang Asli Museum in Gombak. Behind him is a life-sized mannequin in a Senoi Praaq uniform. — STARpic by AZHAR MAHROF

survival and tracking skills of the orang asli were well known, and it was feared that if these skills were used to support the communists, it could prove to be the undoing of the British.

Fortunately, the orang asli were eventually won over and this led the way toward the formation of the Senoi Praaq.

Asmawi says the British took an interest in orang asli affairs at the time and were, to some extent, familiar with their ways. "The British spoke to them in Malay or used a Malay translator when they needed to communicate with them," he says.

The 22nd regiment British Special Air Services (SAS) officially trained the original troop of 40 orang asli and gave them their famous red berets, which members of the unit wear to this day. (In 1997, the red berets were replaced by blue berets, but they were restored in 2003.)

The Senoi Praaq are the only unit other than the SAS who have the honour of wearing the red berets.

The innate skills the orang asli possessed and the SAS training they received proved to be a powerful combination that turned the Senoi Praaq into a formidable fighting force.

There are numerous tales about the stealth, endurance, strength and ferocious fighting skills exhibited by the unit particularly during their heyday when they fought communists regularly, says Asmawi, who regularly chats with elderly orang asli visiting the museum in Gombak.

"They tell me about the old days, the 'golden era' of the Senoi Praaq," he says.

Asmawi relates how a single member of the Senoi Praaq could eliminate 10 communists at a time. Written accounts on the Senoi Praaq describe a time when more communists met a violent end at their hands than any other security forces unit.

"They used guns or jungle equipment such as sharpened bamboo sticks and they also used to set traps called *belantik*," says Asmawi.

The *belantik* was normally used to trap animals but the Senoi Praaq also used them on the communists. A contraption made with roots, rotan and ropes, the *belantik* was cleverly hidden among leaves and grass.



GOLDEN ERA: The Senoi Praaq Battalion 20. The unit came into being not to satisfy a whim of its founder Noone (inset) but rather to control communist activities in the jungles of Malaya. — Pictures courtesy of the Orang Asli Museum

Guided by 'spirits of the forest'

ORANG asli, including members of the Senoi Praaq, are legendary for finding their way through seemingly impassable jungles. The source of this uncanny ability has often been linked to the mystical.

Orang Asli Museum Director Asmawi Mohamed Yunos says the orang asli believe in "spirits of the forest."

"Before they begin looking for someone who's missing, they will ask for help or permission from these spirits through various rituals," he says.

These spirits, according to Asmawi, are summoned to point the orang asli in the right direction and to help

remove obstacles that may lie in their path.

"The orang asli were said to be able to sense the presence of other people in a jungle even when these people were hidden from view," he says.

Rapi Bata also speaks of these spirits. "The orang asli, especially in those days, were really experienced in using this *ilmu* (knowledge). They were good at communicating with the spirits."

Although the Senoi Praaq do not formally rely on these rites, it is believed that the original troop called upon the "spirits" to navigate their way through the jungle.

ahead and lie in wait for them," relates Asmawi.

Today the Senoi Praaq is a part of the General Operations Force of the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP). At the start, the Senoi Praaq unit served as a British SAS auxiliary but was absorbed into the RMP on Feb 8 1968.

The two battalions that exist now are Battalion 3 in Bidor and Battalion

18 in Pengkalan Hulu, Perak. The Senoi Praaq are constantly patrolling the jungles in the country, helping to keep illicit activities like smuggling, human trafficking, illegal migration and other serious crimes in check.

They are also sometimes called in to employ their exceptional jungle tracking skills to find people who have gone missing.

Although the days of fighting

communists are a thing of the past, Asmawi says the legend that is the Senoi Praaq lives on. The same zeal and dedication they employed during the struggle to suppress communism is now evident as they patrol the nation's borders.

"Some say they are so disciplined that not even a grain of rice can get across the border when they are on guard," he says.