

## Culture As An Indigenous Tourism Product Of Mah Meri Community In Malaysia

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the significant role of culture which is utilized by the Mah Meri community in Pulau Carey, Malaysia to practice sustainable tourism. Preliminary study was conducted at Kampung Sungai Bumbon which is a well established indigenous tourism destination in Malaysia. In-depth interview which was used as the qualitative data collection method helped the researchers to holistically understand the community resources which can encourage sustainable tourism practice. Cultural tourism products like wood carvings, weavings, Main Jo'oh dance and Ari Moyang are the main attributes which contribute to tourism development. This study reveals that the community is proud of its culture. However, the community feels that their culture and tourism gradually facing great threat because of the scarcity of natural resources. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to existing literature in the indigenous tourism ground that could be an addition to the social exchange theory current standing.

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### 1. Introduction

Indigenous tourism is a type of rural tourism that allows the tourist to visit the indigenous people settlement and experience an indigenous member's daily life. Indigenous tourism is the focus of this study, because it is considered as an important tool in the development of the rural community, due to the significant positive impacts to the hosts' (Hjalager, 1996). Unlike other kind of niche tourism, there are not many clear definitions of indigenous tourism. Hall and Weiler (1992) defined indigenous tourist from the tourist and demand point of view by addressing indigenous tourism is a kind of 'special interest' tourism and depends on the primary enthusiasm of the tourist. The tourist are motivated to visit the indigenous people are driven by their own preferences.

In addition, the indigenous tourists' are looking for first hand experiences, direct contact with the unique community which is not similar to the tourists' background environment. The fact that indigenous tourism dependent fully on the community uniqueness is also not supported. Indigenous tourism has got strong relationship with the environmental tourism, nature-based tourism, arts and heritage and adventure tourism (Harron and Weiler 1992).

Tourism has been an important industry in Malaysia for a number of years (Musa, 2000) and international arrivals reached 24.6 million and 24.7

million respectively in 2010 and 2011, compared to 10.5 million in 2003 (Ministry of Tourism, 2012). Table 1 shows international tourist arrivals to Malaysia and revenues received from 1998 until 2011. Growth rates have averaged around 5% since 2007, but slowed in 2011 due to adverse economic conditions globally. Malaysia's popularity can be attributed to a rich natural and cultural heritage and the diversity of attractions in the different states which make up the federation. The fact that Malaysia is a multi-racial country with Malays, Chinese, Indians and various indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak living and working alongside harmoniously has become a selling point and is heavily used to promote tourism in the country (Malaysia, Truly Asia campaign). However, this promotion failed to include the indigenous community in their advertisement.

*"To know Malaysia is to love Malaysia. A bubbling, bustling melting pot of races and religions where Malays, Indians, Chinese and many other ethnic groups live together in peace and harmony."* (Tourism Malaysia, 2012)

Orang Asli are the pioneer group of indigenous community exists in Malaysia before it had been invaded by other crowd from various countries. The ethnic label Orang Asli, meaning 'natural people' or 'original people' in Malay language. refers to the indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia who are not Malay Muslims, Malaysia's main ethnic group. The tourism

advertisements often highlight the representatives from Malay, Chinese, Indian their unique culture which can lure the international tourists to visit Malaysia in order to experience the “all-in-one” cultural destination. Suet Ching (2010) argued that the missing in the posters of ‘cultural package’ are the Orang Asli and could be purposeful or unintentional which can reflect a deeper, subtler, and hidden complexity in Malaysian inter-ethnic relations.

The omission of the Orang Asli image is still questionable whether the government is serious in including the Orang Asli community in the mainstream tourism business. This scenario can be regarded as a big threat to achieve sustainable indigenous tourism development in Malaysia. King (1993) also argued that the way in which culture is constructed and manipulated are also seen very clearly in the packaging and development of cultural tourism. Tourism promotion takes place through a number of institutions but primarily through Tourism Malaysia and Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MOCAT). The issue of empowerment (Nikkhah, 2010) and capacity building (Aref et al., 2009a) of the local community has been also a major topic in relation to the community development. The developmental programs initiated by the governments still need a genuine participation from the rural community to sustain the tourism benefits (Aref et al., 2009b).

## 2. Material and Methods

Cultural aspect in indigenous tourism has been a popular research area highlighting the indigenous people and their unique and authentic lifestyle. In this area, commercialization of culture has brought tourism attractions to be targeted especially on cultural celebrations. The culture of each ethnic by indigenous people represents their identity. According to Butler and Hinch (2007), the development of tourism strongly depends on their ethnicity, heritage and festivals. Butler and Hinch (1996) also mentioned that culture has emerged as a powerful attraction not only for tourists but also for entrepreneurs, government agencies and academic researchers.

Many scholars agree that the cultural product has proven to be a medium in boosting tourism development (Brown and Cave, 2010; Cohen, 2007; Liu, 2009). Besemenji et al (2011) said that tourism emerged as a good way of preserving the Ontario Indian customs and culture, but only if the right people are involved and if tourism does not become a business for some individuals. Tourism can also help in the promotion and presentation of Indian customs and cultures. This is the way to introduce

their culture to the world and thus contribute to its preservation. However many author argued that commoditization is the only way to sell the indigenous culture to tourists (i.e; Thompson, 2007 and O’Gorman, 2007).

From the cultural tourism perspectives, commoditization can enhance local economic growth and develop traditions by reducing poverty levels and increasing the inherent value (UNWTO, 2004). However, cultural commoditization has been criticized by several scholars. Cohen (1988) said that using indigenous culture as a mass tourism product can ultimately cause the loss of authenticity, inherent cultural value and significance. The Naxi indigenous community of China went through cultural commoditization and presented their uniqueness to outsiders with the help of the government but they are still in the belief that their culture is well preserved and not faded (Brown and Luo, 2012).

In order to understand the real phenomenon in the particular study area, a preliminary data gathering technique was employed. To obtain the data, naturalistic inquiry was deemed appropriate by using a semi-structured interview as a tool. The semi-structured interview was used as an inductive approach to gain new and unexpected responses from the respondents, which prevents the interviewer from assuming potential variables. However, a questionnaire guide was developed and used throughout the interviewing session to obtain the pattern of answers that are appropriate to the objectives of the study. The data was collected from one of the well established Malaysian indigenous tourism destination; Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Carey Island (Mah Meri People).

Snowballing (Cooper and Schindler, 1998) and theoretical sampling (Minichiello, 1991) are the combined selection procedures that will be used to carry out this research. Snowball sampling means the researcher gets to know the following respondent from the previous respondent. After gaining information from the first respondent, gaps can be identified to whom to speak to next. This is when theoretical sampling will be used. The naturalistic inquiry technique will provide a set of data which is not biased where the real problem in the community can be understood. The data from the naturalistic inquiry was analyzed using a content analysis technique. Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories, based on explicit rules of coding (Weber 1990).

### 3. Mah Meri Community of Kampung Sungai Bumbon

Mah Meri community consists of 2896 members in the year 2004 (JHEOA, 2004). They speak an Austroasiatic language which is originally from the Mon and Khmer's language family. However, they Mah Meri's route to reach Malay Peninsula is still not clear. Nowak (1987) and Suet Ching (2009) argued that the origin of the community is still based on myths. For this study about 11 key informants from Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Carey Island were interviewed. This village is the most well established village in terms of tourism operations among other villages in the area. All the respondents selected are full time participants of tourism activities in the village. The interviewed data was analyzed using discourse analysis technique.

### 4. Analysis and Discussions

Generally, the villagers were consistently involved in the cultural activities even without the existence of tourism once upon a time. The emergence of tourism in their village in late 70's has made them to package their own unique cultural product. According to the Tok Batin of the village, there are three main tourism products which are very closed with Mah Meri culture; Mah Meri Dance, wood carvings, weavings.

*"Other than taking care of the village development, I monitor and ensure whether among youth, young women, where they've aged this skillful carving crafts, I as the head of this village I would encourage them to continue to carve. That is for the men. The women, I make sure that they continue to try weaving and also ensure that women continue integrate each other that they will gather participants from their group. Besides they weave, they will teach traditional dance. These are the women matters..."* (Batin Sidin Bujang, 63 years old, male)

Another respondent added that the 'Ari Moyang' or ancestors' day is a tourism product which can draw a big number of tourists every year.

*"Tourism down here in my view there are two, one sculpture and dance (Jo'oh) among the main attractions at Sg. Bumbun this. The second is a festival. We have it once a year... we celebrate the festival which we call Ari Moyang because it is the main attraction of the three I said. Many tourists also come. I see many come to a place of worship close to the primary school there. The residents of this village will each bring little food, we will all share and eat. Some other villagers also join. Variety of other villages is visible like Chinese also come, so no identity. We down here have our own way la. Indeed there are many tourists, sometimes from tour agents who bring some tourists. That one who promotes this*

*is Tourism Malaysia, and JAKOA but not much la. Kraftangan Malaysia of course is better (in promoting)."* (Yahya Sidin, 33 years old, male)

Many of the respondents generally agreed that their culture is unique and their cultural product is well respected. Embus Seng Keng, a wood carver said that the Mah Meri dance has escalated their popularity nationwide during 1970's.

*"Dance was famous around the year 1977, there was Mah Meri dance. Before the year 1977 the dance was already practiced by us but only after 1977, it became famous. It is a tourism attraction, a tourist attraction now. I was involved in the culture, we were the champion in 1977..then I went to Penang, Johor Bahru, Cameron Highland, Genting Highland, Kuala Terengganu during the opening of the Museum of Kuala Terengganu, that time. That's about how many years I was not quite remember. Some went to Perak, Selangor.. if Angkasapuri (TV station), we are going frequently even now. That's one of the factors can add our income, indirectly. Tourists come to enjoy, see clearly, I mean like that lah.. kind of tourism sector is without doubt I get involved, so this one increase tourism. It is good if there is culture like this, there were tourists come to see in terms of culture."* (Embus Seng Keng, 52 years old, male)

According to another respondent, the Main Jo'oh dance is famous among other types of dance of Orang Asli community.

*"Our Main Jo'oh is receiving good demand. We always perform in functions. People will be excited to see our attire and dance. There was once, last year if I'm not mistaken, we performed at an India wedding function here in Pulau Carey. The Indian lady (bride) is our friend, she always come here and sits with us to learn our weaving...and she asked us to come and perform during their wedding at a wedding hall. All the people in the hall were happy and the place become lively"* (Maznah anak Unyan, 44years old, female)

Maznah anak Unyan who is also the head of the Tompoq Tompoh dance group however said the dance is only performed when there is a booking in advance. This is to ensure the arrangement and gathering of dancers to be made without rushing.

*"If there is no booking or order from tour guide we normally do not dance. So, the tour guide from KL would normally call and tell that he is bringing 5 German tourist tomorrow and I will call my friends to be ready...We do not practice...we know what to do...Like my sister here, she plays Genang (traditional music instrument)...They all know their roles...if a tourist come without informing us to show our dance, it is difficult..Maybe he can see*

*our weaving and buy some souvenirs" (Maznah anak Unyan, 44years old, female)*

The mask and sculptures are also equally important for the Mah Meri's to portray their culture. Sculptures like Kata Kala, Jin Gunung, Hantu, Pawang, Bes Kutu, Moyang Mengkok, Moyang Tijau Didi, Hantu Ketam, Moyang Belangkas, Moyang Lanjut, Harimau Berantai, Moyang Belalang are the main products that are still being carved regularly.

*"Each statue or mask have some stories particularly for it, there is the story of him. Actually in those days, people do mask and statue for medical reasons. If body aches and pains strike we do the mask or statue. Now all has changed, we do it for tourism, to craft. Now the carving of mask and statue has turned into an art." (Yahya Sidin, 33 years old, male)*

Among the sculptures of Mah Meri, Harimau Berantai (tiger statue with chain) is unique and not only become a primary attraction for tourists but also a pride of the wood carvers. The reaction of the tourists after seeing the unique carving is a pride and great satisfaction for the wood carvers.

*"If you want to know the most valuable sculpture, tiger statue with a chain la... Sometimes the tourists who come do not understand, like a tiger is done first and joined (fixed) with the chain later... but that is not actually we do, we will do the tiger and chain together... the time we do the show live we carved one...Tourists see this strangely, there is a ball in the tiger's mouth, they say we make the ball and put in the mouth...but we say that the ball naturally exist in the mouth...without doubt in that, the bizarre thing is interesting." (Alias Sayor, 35 years old, male)*

*"The tourists who visit are so excited. If we (wood carvers) we just make our sculpture, they come and see us and become so happy...they take picture of how we do that. They are very happy, very happy and smile to us" (Atan Seman, 47 years old, male)*

According to Gali Adam, the decision to make a sculpture or mask is not done simply. They will get the idea through dreams. These ideas, design and instructions to do a specific sculpture is from their ancestors.

*"I don't just do this...when I sleep, get dream...my ancestor will come in the dream...or I will dream about a sculpture...that's where I get my idea...but not always I get the dream. Nowadays it is very rare to get a dream...but once I see a picture of sculpture in my dream, I will wake up in the morning and do" (Gali Adam 53 years old, male)*

About 11 private kiosks were constructed by the Kraftangan Malaysia to encourage wood carving. All the kiosks are situated nearer to the wood carvers'

houses enable them to use them as their main base to do wood carving. These facilities are the replacement of Nipah and plastic huts which was been used by the wood carvers for a long time.

## 5. Conclusion

The initial investigation shows that the indigenous community is proud to portray their culture to the outsiders. They are also proud to be known as the icon of tourism among other Orang Asli sub-groups of Malaysia. This study also reveals that the Mah Meri community is eager to explore tourism opportunities in their village. They strongly believe that the tourism business can create many positive outcomes. Apart from that, the community also agrees that the non-economic benefits such as cultural sustainability and environmental sustainability are driven by the emergence of tourism in their village. This result does not contradict the social exchange theory saying that only people who enjoys benefit from tourism will support tourism (Perez and Nadal, 2005; Andreck et al 2005). Although, the community does not consistently enjoy economic benefits from tourism, the support for tourism is strong because of the belief that this industry could preserve their culture towards a sustainable indigenous tourism attainment.

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