

# The Role of Cultural Commoditization towards a Sustainable Tourism Practise of the Mah Meri Community in Malaysia

Puvaneswaran Kunasekaran<sup>1</sup>

Sarjit S. Gill<sup>2</sup>

Ahmad Tarmizi Talib<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

This paper presents the significant role of culture which is utilized by the Mah Meri community in Pulau Carey, Malaysia to practise sustainable tourism. Mah Meri is one of the 18 indigenous tribes in Peninsular Malaysia. Preliminary study was conducted in the year 2013 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 understand the community resources which can encourage sustainable tourism practise. 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 tourism business is facing a threat because of 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 improve the sector into a more beneficial source of income for the indigenous community.

**Keywords** - Indigenous tourism, Mah Meri, sustainability, cultural product, scarcity.

## Introduction

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.

---

1 PhD, Post-Doctoral Researcher, Universiti Putra Malaysia

2 PhD, Associate Professor, Universiti Putra Malaysia

3 PhD, Associate Professor, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Year	Arrivals/Million	Receipts/MYR Billion
1998	5.5	8.6
1999	7.9	12.3
2000	10.2	17.3
2001	12.7	24.2
2002	13.2	25.8
2003	10.5	21.3
2004	15.7	29.7
2005	16.4	32.0
2006	17.45	36.3
2007	20.9	46.1
2008	22.0	49.6
2009	23.6	53.4
2010	24.6	56.5
2011	24.7	58.3

Source: Ministry of Tourism (2012)

**Table 1: International Tourist Arrivals and Receipts to Malaysia**

Growth rates have averaged around five percent 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, in this promotion the indigenous community is overlooked.

*"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)*

The promotional posters show the representative from Malays, Chinese, Indians and various indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak portraying 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' of the Orang Asli 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 Tourism and Culture (MOTAC).

## Literature Review

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 authors 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). A study by Yoko (2006) on the Karen community in Chiang Mai showed that the ecotourism is used to enhance community development. According to the scholar, the establishment of National Park in their area made the local community to be involved in bird watching and elephant trekking activities directly. Apart from that, the genuine participation in tourism has allowed the Karen community to 'commoditize' their culture for economic and cultural sustainability benefits.

In the Malaysian context, Kalsom et al. (2008) has said that the Malaysian government consistently seek to achieve sustainable tourism practise by targeting a balance between business imperatives, cultural heritage preservation and environmental protection. This is evident by the establishment of Orang Asli cultural villages and traditional handicraft centres such as the Pusat Kraftangan Orang Asli (Orang Asli Handicraft Centre) in Cameron Highlands and Mah Meri Cultural Village at Carey Island (Kunasekaran et al, 2013).

Indigenous tourism in Malaysia has high potential as a unique attraction, apart from eco- tourism, which caters particularly for tourists from Australia, New Zealand and Europe, who prefer to learn about unique and remote communities. At these indigenous villages, visitors will be able to witness the traditional dances, lifestyle and hunting techniques personally. However, Gomes (2004) has mentioned that the government has prevented tourists from visiting the Orang Asli community in Taman Negara, Pahang. The author also addressed the government's concern that photographs of half-naked women in their natural living styles may give a wrong impression regarding the majority Malay community's dressing manner.

## **Methodology**

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. Consequently, an interview guide was designed as a list of questions and probing follow-ups, to guide through during the interview. The main reason that the interview guide was selected was to help the researcher stay on track. It will also help to ensure that the important issues/variables were addressed. In addition, the interview guide also provided a framework and sequence for the questions and helped maintain consistency across interviews with different respondents from different type of tourism job involved.

There are three basic parts of the interview guide, which were utilized in this study. The face sheet was used to record information, such as time, date and place of interview. For example, the third respondent interviewed in Kampong Sg. Bumbon was labelled as B3 Basic demographic information about the interviewee was also noted on the face sheet.

## **Mah Meri Community of Kampung Sungai Bumbon**

Mah Meri community consists of 2,896 members in the year 2004 (JHEOA, 2004). The Mah Meri people are also known as 'Besisi' or people with scales (Karim, 1981). They speak an Austroasiatic language which is originally from the Mon and Khmer's language family. However, the 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 seven 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 thematic analysis technique.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Generally, the villagers were consistently involved in the cultural activities even without the existence of tourism. The emergence of tourism in their village during late 70's has made them to package their own unique cultural product. According to the TokBatin (head of the village), there are three main tourism products which are very closed with Mah Meri culture; i.e.; Mah Meri Dance, wood carvings and weaving crafts.

*"Other than taking care of the village development, I monitor and ensure whether among youth, young women, where they've aged this skilful 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 weaving, 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 attract a big number of tourists every year.

*"Tourism here in my view, there are two types, sculpture and dance (Jo'oh) among the main attractions at Sg. Bumbun. The second one is a festival. We have it once a year. We celebrate the festival which we name Ari Moyang because it is the main attraction of the three as 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. 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. Kraftangan Malaysia of course is better (in promoting)."* (Yahya Sidin, 33 years old, male)

## **Mah Meri Dance**

Many of the respondents generally agreed that their culture is unique and their cultural product is well respected. Embus SengKeng, 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 practised 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 Highlands, 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 which can add our income, indirectly. Tourists come to enjoy, see clearly, I mean like that kind of tourism sector is without doubt I get involved, thus, this increases tourism. It is good if there is culture like this, there were tourists who 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 Indian wedding function here in Pulau Carey. The Indian lady (bride) is our friend, she always comes 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 became lively"* (Maznahanak Unyan, 44 years old, female)

Maznahanak Unyan who is also the head of the Tompoq Tompoh dance group however said the dance is only performed when they are booked earlier. This is to ensure the arrangement and gathering of dancers can be made without rushing.

*"If there is no booking or order from tour guide we normally do not dance. So, the tour guide from Kuala Lumpur would normally call and tell that he is bringing 5 German tourists tomorrow and I will call my friends to be ready...We do not practise...we know what to do... Like my sister here, she plays Genang (traditional music instrument)... They all know their roles...if a tourist comes without informing us to show our dance, it is difficult...Maybe he can see our weaving and buy some souvenirs"* (Maznahanak Unyan, 44 years old, female).

## **Wood Carvings**

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* and *Moyang Belalang* are the main products that are still being carved regularly.

*Each statue or mask has 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 becomes 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, it is the tiger statue with a chain... 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 us are so excited, they come and take our pictures, they are interested in our demonstrations like carving and dancing...they really like. 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, and smile to us"*  
*(Atan Seman, 47 years old, male)*

According to Gali Adam, the decision to make a sculpture or mask is not simply made. 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 eleven private kiosks were established by the Kraftangan Malaysia to encourage wood carving. All the kiosks are situated nearer to the wood carvers' houses to enable them to use them as their main base to do wood carving. These facilities are the replacement of *Nipah* and plastic huts which have been used by the wood carvers for a long time.

## **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. The results also clearly show that the community is very much open to outsider and encourage any tourism development efforts in their area. Tourism is perceived as a strong tool to connect them to the outside world. Existence of tourism in their area not only directs governmental, non-governmental and inter-ethnic affiliations, but also directs international exposure to the community.

The perception that the community is often neglected by the authorities makes the community feel that they are not empowered (Kunasekaran, 2014). The community agreed that the outsiders especially the government always discuss with the community before any implementation of projects. According to the Tok Batin, the discussions are considered as a formality task of the officers to respect the villagers. The final decision of developmental projects however goes to the government. If this goes on, the community will feel detached with any tourism developments organized by the government. Thus, the government should not merely consult the community



to fulfil procedures, on a token basis. They should respect the community's ideas and give them opportunities of trial and error. By doing this, the community can learn themselves and improve their level.

The future studies within the scope of Orang Asli and tourism participation should also consider understanding the demand side of the tourism industry. Understanding the supply side of the market alone is inadequate to make indigenous tourism sustainable. The study of tourist motivation visiting indigenous groups should be done to identify factors influencing the target market to choose indigenous tourism as preferred tourism attraction. By understanding the demand side attributes, a holistic understanding of sustainable indigenous tourism can be attained.

### **Acknowledgement**

This research was funded by the Ministry of Education (MOE) under the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS).

## References

- Besermenji, S., Milić, N., & Mulec, I. (2011). *Indians Culture in the Tourism of Ontario. Zbornik Radova Geografskog Instituta " Jovan Cvijić"*, SANU, 61 (3), 119-136.
- Butler, R. & Hinch, T. (2007). *Tourism and Indigenous People: Issues and Implications*, 2nd edition, Michigan: Butterworth-Heinemann (first published: 1996).
- Brown, K. & Luo, T. (2012). *Authenticity versus Commoditization: The Chinese Experience in the UNESCO Heritage Site of Lijiang*. International Cultural Tourism Conference: New Possibilities, 13 (1), pp.123-141.
- Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(3): 371-386.
- Jabatan Hal-Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA), (2004). *Data Maklumat Asas Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Bahagian Penyelidikan dan Perancangan.
- Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA), (2010). *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli Report of 2010*. Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli: Kuala Lumpur.
- Gomes, A. G. (2004). The Orang Asli of Malaysia. *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter*, 35, 10.
- Kalsom K., Nor Ashikin M., N., & Mohamad Amin M., I., (2008). *Penglibatan Komuniti dalam Pelancongan Lestari dlm. Pelancongan Malaysia: Isu Pembangunan, Budaya, Komuniti dan Persempatan*, Edited by Yahaya Ibrahim, Sulong Mohamad, Habibah Ahmad, Sintok: Universiti Utara Malaysia Press.
- Karim, W. J. B. (1981). *Ma'Betisek Concepts of Living Things*. London: Athlone Press.
- King. V.T. (1993). Tourism and Culture in Malaysia. In Hitchcock, M., King. V.T. and Parnwell, M.J.G. (Eds.) *Tourism in Southeast Asia* (pp. 96 – 116). London: Routledge.
- Kunasekaran, P. (2014). *Factors Influencing Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Attainment of The Mah Meri Community in Carey Island, Malaysia (PhD)*. Universiti Putra Malaysia.
- Liu, O., P. (2008). *Packaging Myths for Tourism: The Rungus of Kudat*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press.
- Ministry of Tourism Malaysia (2012). *Downloads - Statistics - MOTOUR*. [online] Retrieved from: <http://www.motour.gov.my/en/download/viewcategory/49-statistik.html> [Accessed: 19 July 2012].

- Nowak, S. (1987). *Marriage and Household: Btsisi' Response to a Changing World*. PhD dissertation., State University of New York at Buffalo.
- O'Gorman, K. D., and Thompson, K. (2007). *Tourism and Culture in Mongolia: the Case of Ulaanbaatar Naadam*. *Tourism and Indigenous Peoples: Issues and implications*, 161-175.
- Suet Ching, C. (2010). *Mah Meri on Stage: Negotiating National Policies, Tourism and Modernization in Kampung Sungai Bumbun, Carey Island*. PhD theses. University of Hawai.
- Tourism Malaysia, (2012). *Tourism Malaysia: A bit of culture*. [online] Retrieved from: <http://www.tourism.gov.my/en/master/web-page/experiences> [Accessed: 2 September 2012].
- UNWTO (2004). *Sustainable Tourism Development*. [online] (Retreived on 20 September 2012) Available at: <http://sdt.unwto.org/en>.