

Strengthening Traditional Competencies of Mah Meri Community for Indigenous Tourism Service Performance

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Abstract: This paper presents the perception of the indigenous community on tourism development in their area. This study was conducted at Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Carey Island, Selangor populated by the Mah Meri community. Naturalistic inquiry which was used as the qualitative data collection method helped the researchers to understand the host-tourism relationship before conducting further investigation. The findings show that the traditional competencies are important for sustainable community development. The community also revealed that the outsiders' influence is highly significant for the village to run the tourism activities successfully. However, the community feels that their culture and tourism business has been exploited by outsiders. The findings of this study will contribute to existing literature in the indigenous tourism field that could enhance the sector into a more profitable business for the indigenous communities in Malaysia.

Key words: Indigenous tourism • Mah Meri • Community development • Naturalistic inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Orang Asli are the pioneer group of indigenous community which exists in Malaysia long before it was occupied by people from various other countries through commercial interaction, political interest, religion expansion and even annexation. 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. [1] stressed that there should be no doubt that the predecessors of the Orang Asli settled in the Malay Peninsula earlier than the predecessors of Malay community. [2] argued that the Negritos are considered to have come to the Malay Peninsula about 25,000 years ago. However, the Semai are

the largest population and the oldest indigenous community in Peninsular Malaysia [3]. Most of the Semai live at the foothill and mountain areas in the borders of Perak and Pahang [4].

Community development has been the ongoing issue for the Orang Asli people in Malaysia. Several governmental and non-governmental organizations and associations have been established to support the community. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs (JHEOA) was established by the British Government in 1953 and was intended to gain the support of the indigenous community in the battle against communist insurgents [5] (Nicholas, Chopil and Sabak, 2003). Gradually, after independence, the objective of the organization was changed to address the educational, medical and poverty issues of the minority group.

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Apart from the governmental agencies, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play an important role in Orang Asli developmental efforts. Persatuan Orang Asli Semenanjung Malaysia (POASM) was established in 1976 by some members of the Orang Asli community in order to protect the heritage, culture and future of the community. The establishment of POASM has proved that the indigenous community are prepared to lead their own community without being too dependent on outsiders. Apart from that, Centre of Orang Asli Concerns (COAC) was initiated in 1989 by some individuals and Orang Asli members. This organization specifically supports the community in fighting for their rights on various issues ranging from land ownership to education. COAC encourages and facilitates the development of independent community and regional Orang Asli organizations [6].

Literature Review: Indigenous tourism is gradually becoming a popular tourist attraction in the world. This represents an opportunity for indigenous people or aborigines to promote their distinctive cultural identity. Indigenous tourism means tourism activities where the indigenous people are directly involved in imparting knowledge and information about their culture [7]. However, indigenous group are differentiated by their uniqueness and cultural identity of the selected society. This can be seen where the economic system is planned and organized towards traditional system which can be seen implemented in some countries of the world. The main attraction relies on uniqueness of their genuine habitats as well as the type of natural resources available in these territories.

Indigenous tourism can be defined as 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 [8]. Unlike other types of niche tourism, there are not many clear definitions and characterization of indigenous tourism. [9] defined indigenous tourist from the tourist and demand point of view. [9] also mentioned indigenous tourism is a kind of 'special interest' tourism and depends on the primary enthusiasm of the tourist. The tourists' motivation to visit the indigenous people is driven by their own personal preferences. In addition, the indigenous tourists

are looking for first hand experiences and direct contact with the unique community which is not similar to the tourists' own environment.

The purpose of this research is also to investigate the participation of the indigenous people in tourism activities. The Orang Asli often have unused land as well as underutilized premises such as unused properties and rooms. These 'dead' assets can easily be turned into a profit-making home stays. Home stay business is a flexible enterprise, unlike rigid 'hotel' structures; it can expand and contract according to the market demands [8]. Apart from that, tourism also encourages Mah Meri to stay together as it sustains them as a productive unit by offering work to all members and particularly to the women.

The fact that Malaysia is a multi-racial country with Malays, Chinese, Indians and various indigenous people from Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak living and working alongside harmoniously has become a selling point and is aptly used to promote tourism in the country (Malaysia, Truly Asia campaign). However, this initiative failed to effectively include the indigenous community in their promotion.

"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 representatives 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. [10] argued that missing in the promotional posters of 'cultural package' are the Orang Asli and this may be deliberate, which then could reflect a deeper, subtler and hidden complexity in Malaysian inter-ethnic relations. The omission of the Orang Asli image questions 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.

[11] also argued that the way in which culture is constructed and manipulated is also seen very clearly in the packaging and development of cultural tourism. Some of the promotional materials contain highly misleading

characteristics which can be ambiguous for the tourist in understanding the cultural diversity of Malaysia. Tourism promotion takes place through a number of institutions but primarily through Tourism Malaysia and Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) especially for the indigenous tourism.

[12] has said that the Malaysian government consistently seek to achieve sustainable tourism practice 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.

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, [1] 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 setting may give a wrong impression regarding the majority Malay community's dressing manner.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data was collected from one of the well established Malaysian indigenous tourism destinations; Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Carey Island (Mah Meri People). The Mah Meri people are also known as 'Besisi' or people with scales [13]. They speak an Austroasiatic language which is originally from the Mon and Khmer's language family. Snowballing [14] and theoretical sampling [15] 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. The investigation will end when the data collected is considered to be at the saturation level based on theoretical sampling. 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 thematic analysis technique [16].

Analysis and Interpretation: The existing skills possessed by the community are polished further by the intervention of governmental agencies. Apart from that, the initiatives of experts within the community to educate the youngsters were also found to be the key point to build community capacity. In terms of capacity building, the community is interested to own a long-lasting skill to keep on undertaking tourism activities. In order to achieve that, various steps have been taken by the Mah Meri people and the outsiders to upgrade their potentials.

“In terms of cultural courses there is KEKWA, of the Department of Culture which offers us training. They are always open to us; it is only the individual or our cultural dance group that do not want grab this opportunity. Maybe we do not want to involve others and fear that our traditional dance will be mixed with other cultures.” (Embus Seng Keng, 52 years old, male)

“The younger generation who are not skillful will go to JAKOA for the course - but not to learn. JAKOA do not know the techniques to carve. JAKOA outsourced the courses to FRIM (Forest Research Institute of Malaysia), to teach our youngsters in choosing high quality wood to carve. FRIM only gave a course on how to cut, how to choose wood, quality of wood, the way there are boiled and so on.” (Batin Sidin Bujang 63 years old, male)

Another respondent also agreed that the collaboration with FRIM is not only to learn about the types of woods but also as a knowledge sharing effort to educate the forestry officers about the details of forest amenities.

“Indeed there is also teaching. For us, too, there is a course at Sungai Buloh, at FRIM. That is where I teach. What they did not know is about the wood and the details. People of FRIM do not know about *Nyireh Batu*. All they know is about *cengal, jati, jelutong* (types of woods). When we introduced this wood they say it is beautiful, fine veining, can make

furniture. Yes, I was also teaching there. Apart from that, I also taught many of the villagers to do carving. They initially had no skill but after some time they can make beautiful sculptures. I think I was defeated many times by them in terms of the types of beautiful sculptures made. Indeed, they are very creative. At FRIM for about a week I taught them. I went with my friends. We also learn there, we recognize the machine, identify the types of wood, we make new carving demonstrations. Usually, FRIM officers will bring us there and send us back.” (Kemi, 38 years old, male)

Apart from the wood carving skills training, a respondent said that there is no training given to communicate with tourists. This has forced them to independently learn how to talk when a tourist approached them.

“If training for tourism, without doubt it is certainly never taught here. This kind of tourism concept I do not understand. I know that some people come here and that is tourism. Regardless of people in this country or people from overseas who come here, we only talk about village origin; we just talk naturally to them. The ministry is not teaching us how to talk but they do teach us how to negotiate price with tourists and the ministry also helps us to promote our product. I used to go London. So I know what tourists want, tourists always want to know. As for me, I feel very lucky to be able to go there and learn about tourists' attitudes. Recently my friends went to Beijing, China and the United States. But here, only if there are tourists who want to learn carving, we will teach, so I guess we have to be here in this kiosk always.” (Alias, 35 years old, male)

From the conversations analyzed, it can be understood that the community is ready to learn any related skills to equip them to run tourism business successfully. The overseas trips organized and sponsored by government agencies to promote the Mah Meri tourism products were well utilized by the wood carvers to learn the international tourist preferences and behavior.

CONCLUSION

The community strongly believe that tourism plays an important role in community development of the village. The tourism development should be also seen as

an ongoing process to achieve sustainable development for the Orang Asli community. Hence, it is important to monitor and understand the level of skills of the Orang Asli people in the recently developed tourism programs by the government. The government through various agencies provided many opportunities for the Orang Asli to sharpen their skills. Sustainable tourism is only possible when community participation, community capacity building and empowerment in implemented [17-21].

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