



## Indigenous knowledge and cultural tourism among the *Mah Meri* people in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Cultural tourism is a great potential source of economic gains for local industries and indigenous people. The aboriginal people of Malaysia known as Orang Asli have used their indigenous knowledge (IK) as part of their cultural tourism. This study aims to explore the attractions of cultural tourism by the Mah Meri tribe. This qualitative study includes semi-structured interviews of ten research participants, participant observation, and document analysis. The intrinsic case study is conducted at a well-known indigenous cultural tourism site at Carey Island in Selangor. The in-depth interviews are audio-taped, transcribed, and checked for converging themes to understand the community resources of IK which contribute to cultural tourism practices. Findings showed that wood carvings, mask carvings, pandanus weavings, and cultural performance are the most important practices of the Mah Meri tribe. These practices contribute to their income and the development of indigenous cultural tourism. The observations show that the community is extremely proud of its cultural heritage and often perform their cultural practices, especially for tourists. This study also provides major implications for the improvement of cultural tourism. Tourism authorities play an important role in the development of local cultural tourism quality standard. Specifically, tourism authorities can promote local cultural tourism and preserve the IK by passing it to the younger generations.

**Keywords:** cultural tourism, education, indigenous knowledge, indigenous people, Malaysia

Wahab NA, Abdullah R, Astuti SI, Rohaizad NAA (2020) Indigenous knowledge and cultural tourism among the *Mah Meri* people in Malaysia. *Eurasia J Biosci* 14: 4137-4143.

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### INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is the traditional local knowledge that shows the cultural element practices of a specific community (Samukelisiwe, 2018). IK is composed of few aspects such as principles, skills, practices, rituals, and customs practiced by the elderly of a specific race or tribe and inherited from generation to generation (Adam et al., 2019). IK includes various aspects of the indigenous people's life, such as farming and cultivation, conventional medicine, traditional music and instruments, utilization of natural resources, folk stories, spiritual dance, and traditional handicrafts. IK is an important aspect of the indigenous people heritage (Quiggin, 2008). IK has been perceived as uncoded information that is frequently thought to be contradictory with positivist techniques and different from modern Western science (Shiza, 2008). Kagoda (2009) stated that IK is the local knowledge and used by a community essential to its livelihood. Relevant skills are informally passed on to younger generations by learning through activity and collaboration and practice and experience to

sustain the indigenous livelihood in most parts of Africa and Asia.

In the most remote parts where the world's aboriginal population live, cultural tourism is presented as an economic nostrum for communities whose traditional economies and ways of life are compromised by the dominant societies in which they belong (Bunten, 2010). Tourism has become a significant part of today's economy. Given the impact of globalization, Malaysia has explored its tourism industry recently. Consequently, tourism has become the main source of income and employment for Malaysians. Cultural tourism is one of the most important keys to attract people from different parts of the globe. Cultural tourism enables people to enjoy the beautiful landscapes and learn considerable knowledge about a cultural area.

The indigenous people in Malaysia known as *Orang Asli* represent approximately 12% of the populace.

Received: December 2019

Accepted: April 2020

Printed: October 2020

These minorities' unique way of life can attract local and foreign visitors. This indigenous group is known to rely upon woods and nearby natural resources. Most of the members of the *Orang Asli* groups are independently employed (Mohd Yusof et al., 2013). Various economic activities of this indigenous group are not feasible, and the majority of their population is poor. The Department and Development of Orang Asli (JAKOA) stated that the available economic resources cannot provide indigenous groups a sustainable source of income given the low market cost, and they are often misled by opportunistic mediators who control the cost of the sold goods procured by them (JAKOA, 2011).

The term "cultural tourism" contains two words, namely, "culture" and "tourism" (Puvaneswaran et al., 2016). The terms allude to the tourism industry's segment associated with the cultural heritage of a specific location or region in at least one way. Tourism and culture have always been connected. Cultural view, attractions, and events provide an essential motivation for travel. The travel itself can generate culture (Richards, 2018).

Cultural perspective in indigenous tourism has been a prominent research area, given that it features indigenous individuals and their novel and authentic way of life. In this area, the commercialization of culture has transformed tourism attractions as the focus of cultural celebrations. The culture of every ethnic of indigenous individuals speaks to their character. Cultural tourism denotes the tourist visits to a place or destination to see or enjoy various cultures in certain ways. The nature of such visits can vary depending on the diverse motives of tourists or different types of cultural assets. Cultural tourism has recently been reaffirmed by the The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as a major element of international tourism consumption, accounting for over 39% of tourism arrivals. Cultural tourism research has also grown rapidly, particularly in fields of cultural consumption, cultural motivations, heritage conservation, cultural tourism economics, anthropology, and the relationship with the creative economy (UNWTO, 2001).

Cultural tourism is perceived as a progression strategy that races to obtain foreign exchange conversely with other improvement procedures. However, this perception is only possible if tourism assets are accessible at every goal and the locals provide tourism resources, such as their unique society, methods of living, and indigenous traditions, to attract visitors (Rohayu et al., 2015).

### **Mah Meri People**

A total of 18 *Orang Asli* (aboriginal or indigenous people) tribes reside in the western part of Peninsular Malaysia. Among these indigenous tribes is the *Mah Meri*. The *Mah Meri* people are named by the government as the *Senoi* subgroup. This indigenous

community is composed of approximately 1,400 people, and this tribe is concentrated around Kampung Sungai Bumbun in Carey Island. The community of *Mah Meri* (which translates to forest people) has a language of Mon-Khmer root, lives in modest wooden houses, and performs their traditional culture through various indigenous practices, such as wood-carving spirits, weavings, traditional dances, and music. The vast majority of the *Mah Meri* individuals live in little towns on the edges of different urban areas and Pulau Carey, which has five separate towns of *Mah Meri*. The local *Mah Meri* language is also known as *Besisi*. This community is also called the "Ocean People," given that they live along the coast which faces the ocean and practices fishery as their bread and butter. The prime significance of this study is its contribution toward local literature regarding activities promoting and enhancing the IK and traditions of the *Mah Meri* people, especially in cultural tourism. Similar to the rest of indigenous groups throughout the world, the indigenous peoples in Carey Island are still performing the traditional occupations, such as farming, hunting, and fishing.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, ten participants were selected and interviewed using purpose sampling and semi-structured interviews, respectively. Purposive sampling was done based on the assumption that the participants had the traditional knowledge pertaining to their environment. The participants were composed of the male and female elders of the *Mah Meri* tribe. Following Kumar (2011), the researchers only went to those people who in their opinion were likely to have the required information and be willing to share it. Data were retrieved from one of the more prominent Malaysian indigenous tourist destinations and Carey Island. The protocol interview was used as an instrument apart from observation checklist to support the data. This site-based research, including the recorded observations of the village and villagers, was conducted in the village over a period of multiple visits. The respondents were selected using purposive samplings with snowball technique and given corresponding code names.

The gathered information from the first respondent was used to determine the next interviewee. The researchers conducted qualitative research and observable group behaviors (Constable et al., 2012). Case studies provided an up-close and in-depth details and offered insights that were not captured by other approaches (Mills et al., 2010). This case study was conducted to record and describe the first-hand experience of those involved in the tourism activities at the villages in Carey Island. This case study provided an opportunity to understand the experience of finding and revitalizing the *Mah Meri* culture and its traditions from the point of view of those directly involved.

## Findings and discussions

The statistical data was methodically dissected. The qualitative information was investigated by utilizing thematic methodology and coding in the wake of deciphering in its entirety, which produced developing topics. Coding, classifying, and concept identification made the detailing of the information progressively important and exhaustive. Following Yin (2014), all consideration was taken to guarantee that proper understanding of the data and systems utilized in the data analysis were of the most elevated quality. Throughout this study, considerable ongoing practiced IK was found. During interview session, the informants were asked mainly on four aspects of environmentally-related IK, namely, wood carvings, mask carvings, pandanus weavings, and cultural performance.

### Wood carvings

The *Mah Meri* people have a rich heritage in crafts and skills. The wooden work is the most important feature of the *Mah Meri* cultural village. Wood is the most important material used in building indigenous houses and crafting furniture and decorations. Wood carvings among the *Orang Asli* tribes are believed to originate from a healing ceremony. A shaman will transfer the spirit causing the sickness from the patient's body to a wooden sculpture of ancestral spirits during the ceremony. Then, this wooden sculpture containing the wicked spirit will be left in the jungle or thrown into a river or sea. In indigenous communities in Canada, healing activities by individuals or societies are necessary to heal those affected by a disease. The carvings are made from Nyireh Batu, which is a red and rare mangrove hard wood from the mahogany family. A respondent shares that a Nyireh Batu tree sapling will take 15 years to mature. A traditional African artist or carver does not aimlessly go to the forest to chop down trees whenever they want. If an artist or carver is interested in any particular tree in the forest, the community will first perform a sacrifice to know whether the tree wants to be chopped or not. If any particular tree is selected to be chopped down, sacrifices will be made first before touching the tree at all.

*"When we want to cut the tree, we'll wait for at least 15 years so that the tree is mature and be sure to keep the seedlings re-planted so that the supply of wood is not exhausted".* (R1)

The respondents state that the patterns or abstracts produced on the handicraft made by the *Mah Meri* tribe have specific purposes, such as for curing a disease, celebrating a wedding, and appreciating ancestral spirits' help or presence. The indigenous life is loaded with mysterious beliefs, which are evident in the *Mah Meri* people's normal daily settings and natural living ambience. The presence of the statues and masks are enlivened by their fantasies or tales from their

precursors which are associated to their legends (Norasmah & Husnorhafiza, 2011).

*"Sculptures were the main products that were still being carved regularly like Moyang Belangkas, Moyang Mengkok, Moyang Tijau Didi, Moyang Lanjut, and Moyang Belalang".* (R3)

Some handicrafts are intended for medical purpose to call the spirits for medication. Surprisingly, the *Mah Meri* people group has figured out how to preserve the tradition of spiritual wood cutting that is genuinely world class as far as it can be in relation to the quality of its art and creativity (Lambin et al., 2019). The indigenous art, which shows rich mythological meanings behind images and symbols, is passed down from generation to generations. Such kinds of practices save the traditional purposes and conserve the vegetation, which in turn help people to preserve the environment and minimize the dangers of deforestation (Siambombe, Mutale & Muzingili, 2018). Each wooden craft has a different story of the spirit world. These stories shape the indigenous beliefs and cultures, which are only known to them. They have a strong family bond which extends to their deceased family members and ancestors who are still worshipped for guidance, good will, and well-being. Local and foreign tourists visit indigenous places to buy the sculptures and collect them as a precious collection. Consequently, the price of the indigenous arts can rise up to thousands of Ringgit. In this study, the informants state that their wood carvings are inspired from the nature and surroundings and other resources, which are common and can be collected from the nearby areas of their settlement.

### Mask carvings

Mask carving is a workmanship impelled by the extraordinary universe of the *Orang Asli*. This universe is stacked up with glorious forces, which are incredible and noxious. The carvings are frequently decorated with paint and plaits from Nipah leaves. Distinctive legends, dreams, and folk tales of the past are told through the masks. The main group that carves wooden masks is the *Mah Meri* of the *Senoi* tribe. The masks are initially produced using Pulai wood, which is a light-weight whitish wood perfect for mask making. However, this kind of wood has becoming rare and become very expensive when sell to tourist.

*The size ranges from just a couple of centimeters to almost half a meter in height; the carving can reach prices of up to a couple thousand ringgit each and sought after the tourist.* (R6)

Therefore, carvers have to change to Nyireh Batu wood, which is a rosy hardwood. Masks are carved by the *Mah Meri* people as an indication of respect to their predecessors who are viewed as amazing and ought to be loved. *Moyang* is a word utilized for each mask that alludes to the ancestors. The indigenous group perceives their ancestors as gatekeepers who defend

their peaceful existence. In this way, the *Mah Meri* people can perform their daily activities with ease, such as hunting and farming, and protect their loved ones from diseases.

*I believe my ancestors always take care of us even though they have gone through my carving. I dreamt on how I should carve my carvings. The monkey's carving art cradled by his mother also has been recognized by UNESCO. People come all over the world to buy the carvings.* (R5)

The elders additionally make an impact by placing themselves in a larger society and a more extensive community. Such indigenous learning is "passed on" through standard language, customary legends, understandings of totems, family relationship ties, and executions of moves, songs, stories, dreams, legends, traditions, capacities, and activities or occasions that impact the everyday life.

### **Pandanus weavings**

Pandanus leaves, also known as "screw pine" are seen everywhere in Carey Island. These leaves have a nice aroma, and thus they are used to wrap rice, meat, or fish. Pandanus leaf weaving or *anyam hake* which are processed into colored strips is in accordance with the tradition of the *Orang Asli* tribes. Pandanus weaving is one of the most significant activities of the female members of the *Mah Meri* towns. Female weavers use pandanus to create mats, bins, *bujam*, betel pockets, caps, personal embellishment, and numerous other crafts. The hand-crafted baskets are used during ceremonies and given as gifts. Craft owners are working on tourism products and aim to perpetuate the hereditary traditions by teaching it to their children (Noraini et al., 2018).

Pandanus leaves are used in various *Mah Meri* tribe rituals, which involve special techniques. A particular example is the custom in welcoming the indigenous group's respected visitors. The mat used to welcome visitors is wholly woven with exclusive motifs to clean their feet. The mat is good for one use only. The used mats are given to the person who used it as a gift. The *sungu* crate is weaved for storing rice and utilizes the method known as thistle weaving. The thistles can secure the contents of the basket. The *Mah Meri* group is well known for their own *anyaman* from Nipah or pandanus weaving, given that every single item has their own meaning. The *Mah Meri* community also wants the authorities to take steps to protect mangrove forests so that it will not be swallowed up by the current development and modernization. Their concern over the extinction of forest resources for fear of future generations could not inherit the handicraft (Shah et al., 2018).

I looked into my surroundings and get the idea on how and what pattern to weave, but now pandan leaves are harder to find. I need to go deep inside to get some

supplies. I hope the authority can help us about this. My grandchildren maybe don't recognize the plants anymore (R4).

In developing countries, numerous societies are utilizing assets which can be found in their own local territories to support their lives. A threat of losing pandanus bunches is imposed by land clearance, which resulted in the loss of crude material used for *anyam hake*. Minah, one of the respondents, claims that the *Mah Meri* leaf origami is older than the Japanese paper origami, but the problem lies with the scarcity of the pandan leaves. This indigenous group protects the ecosystem, implying that their way of life depends on the resources available to them. Through the indigenous belief system, the *Mah Meri* group has a deep cultural, spiritual, and material attachment to and dependency on the natural resources found therein (Carino & Colchester, 2010; Ulluwishewa et al., 2008).

### **Cultural performances**

The traditional mask dance or *Jo'oh* of the *Mah Meri* group is considered the main attraction for tourists. *Jo'oh* is the only mask dance practiced by the *Orang Asli* tribes in Malaysia. This mask dance is a non-ritualistic ceremony frequently performed by people during *Ari Moyang*, weddings, and different blissful events to welcome the spirits of their predecessors participating in the festivals. Accompanied by a band made up of female indigenous group members playing conventional *Mah Meri* instruments, each dance group is composed of seven dancers (two males and five females). The male members will speak to the profound progenitors as the female dancers perform around them, alluring them to participate. This performance implies the actions of the masked spirit of the predecessors.

*In the dance, two men wearing masks known as Tok Pongkola and Tok Nania also danced with dancers wearing special clothes made of various natural resources. This dance is usually held in March every year.* (R7)

This dance has an interesting story behind it. The legend focuses on two siblings from the *Mah Meri* tribe who have survived a great flood. For seven years, they have explored the entire world and realized that they are actually the last two humans on earth. All of the today's humanity is consequently the children of these two ancient survivors. The story is told as the dance unfolds. The music is fundamentally the same as Malay music. The instruments played by the *Orang Asli* are violins, rebana, and gong. However, the extremely novel customary *Orang Asli* instrument is known as the *Centong Buluh*. This instrument is actually a bamboo that the *Mah Meri* used during the play. The instrument has been perceived by the UNESCO given its uniqueness (Jami'ah, 2009).

Music is used to communicate to the things that are not visible to the naked eye. Music is also used to link

this world to the other world. A song associated with this story is played by the *Mah Meri* people. This song is performed to make changes to the world and remind the *Mah Meri* people that a higher power exists. This indigenous group sings a melody in a repeating manner. The elderly Alang states that:

If you slaughter animals, you must eat the meat. If you cut a tree, you must use the wood. If you carve a sculpture, you must at least leave the sculpture there. (R10)

The assembly of the dancers can be made without rushing. The society additionally concurs that the non-financial advantages, such as cultural maintainability and ecological manageability, are accelerated by the development of the tourism industry in their village (Puvanewaran et al., 2013). Chang, Backman, and Chih Huang (2013) studied cultural tourism sites in Taiwan and found that on-site tourism experience is the most attractive means for tourist to revisit and experience such antecedent. Indigenous people in Taiwan wear traditional clothes, perform activities associated with their heritage, and share simplified information about their culture to visitors (Bunten, 2010). Mapunda's (2001) research in South Australia regarding aboriginal cultural tourism showed that the factor that motivates tourism is employment instead of profit.

## CONCLUSION

This research has analyzed the IK and the cultural tourism among the *Mah Meri* people, which is one of the largest indigenous communities in Malaysia. Given the increasing number of tourists, this study aims to improve the investment and infrastructure of the *Mah Meri* cultural village and improve the life standards of the indigenous people. Local destinations take advantages

of the tourist flow by providing special services, such as homestay inns. These local services will allow local and foreign tourists to stay with the *Mah Meri* at their home to know more about their lifestyle and custom. The government and indigenous groups must perceive tourism as a potential source of employment and a significant factor of economic growth. From indigenous groups' perspective, employment opportunities are their main motive to engage with the tourism industry. Thus, local governments must support the indigenous people and their culture. In this way, indigenous groups can continue their IK. The young members of indigenous groups must also be given the opportunity to keep up with this traditional skill. The indigenous people can be taught from small age to cultivate their deep interest in their traditions. Threats affecting IK directly or indirectly exist as reported by Tang and Gavin (2016). Given the importance of IK in biodiversity conservation, fostering the awareness of IK is imperative among indigenous communities in Kota Belud. Such efforts will be welcomed by the indigenous groups. Documentation must involve indigenous peoples directly with the support and collaboration of state government, local authority, and other concerning organizations. Relieving and protecting IK can be empowering to the indigenous communities in economic, social, and environmental aspects.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The primary author would like to acknowledge the cooperation of the research participants and express a sincere gratitude to the Research Management and Research Centre (Research Code: 2016-0226-107-41) of Sultan Idris Education University for the grant that partially supports this study.

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