

The role community resources for sustainable tourism practice of Mah Meri indigenous community of Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper presents the significant role of resources 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. Natural tourism products like wood carvings and weavings are the main attributes which contribute to tourism development. This study reveals that the community is proud of its diversified environment. 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 and community resources ground.

Keywords: *Tourism, Indigenous people, Sustainability, Scarcity*

1. Introduction

Orang Asli or “original people” is used to refer to the indigenous peoples in Peninsular Malaysia. The term Orang Asli is a substitute of the term ‘aborigines’ used by the British colonial administration (Gomes, 2004). This minority community with overall population of only 178,197 represents 0.5% of the Malaysian population. In 2010, JAKOA (Indigenous People Development Department) reported that Orang Asli population had increased to 178,197 in 2010 compared to only 141,230 in 2006. Categorized as minority groups in the country, they comprise of three main groups, namely, Negrito, Senoi/Semai and Proto-Malay.

Orang Asli were separated into three nationwide categories during the English colonization for the objective of assisting the management in those days (July Edo, 2006). Each group was separated into sectors; groups situated in several locations in the woodlands, the hills, the rural areas and near the coastline or stream estuary (Amran Kasimin, 1995). Gomes (2004) 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. Hasan Mat Nor (1998) in his work 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 (Ying, 2009). Most of the Semai live at the foothill and mountain areas in the borders of Perak and Pahang (Dentan, 2000). The headman of the Orang Asli community is generally known as 'Tok Batin'. The Tok Batin is in charge of internal affairs and issues regarding the group. Apart from that, the Tok Batin also is responsible for maintaining the inherited customs, traditions and order in the village.

The Mah Meri community is one of the sub-ethnic groups of the major Senoi group. 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, their Mah Meri's route to reach Malay Peninsula is still not clear and mainly rely on myths (Nowak, 1987) and (Suet, 2010). One of the earliest notes of Carey Island was recorded by Nowak (1987) saying that during the 1900s about 20,000 acres out of 35,000 acres of the mangrove and rainforest were converted into commercial oil palm plantations. This big scale transformation has caused destruction in basic resources, extinction of flora and fauna and disruption of natural ecosystem. Areas which used to be accessed for fishing, hunting and recreation are not accessible result in the change of ecological system which reflects in the musical, material and cultural contents of the Mah Meri's performances (Suet, 2010).

Nicholas (2000) highlighted that the modernization is intended to improve the Orang Asli villages in the country in terms of education, health, electricity and water. Suet (2010) stressed that the destruction of the ancestral territories, natural resources, forest and river accessibility have hugely disappointed the Mah Meri community. This has made the community to realize that they still have their arts and performing traditions well kept to strengthen their value in the country and make the government appreciate them. This can be seen in various touristic products of the community; weavings, woodcarvings, masks, Main Jo'oh dance marketed in Tourism Malaysia website, internet websites, tourists guide books, and magazines. Thus, it can be said that the community has chosen tourism as a tool to portray their uniqueness to outsiders and enjoy some financial advantages at the same time. Sarkissian (1988) who studied the tradition and the cultural shows to be displayed for tourism purpose however argue the tourism products are only at the level of staged performances and not to create any cultural awareness.

2. Literature review

Community sources are the assets that the community already has to run the tourism business. These resources could be tangible or intangible resources. Almost all the community sources found in the study are related directly or indirectly to nature. This shows that the community is strongly dependent on forest amenities not only for tourism activities but also for their daily life routine.

2.1 Natural resources

Natural resources can be classified as renewable and non-renewable resources (Voora and Venema (2008). Frank and Smith (1999) classified these resources into six components; (1) land, water, air; (2) minerals; (3) oil and gas; (4) plant and trees; (5) wild life; and regulations regarding the previously mentioned attributes. Although, natural resources are one of the main advantages of rural community to promote tourism, sustainability has been a major issue. Pearce, Markandya and Barbier (1989) argued that natural resources must be regarded as critical natural capital and should be handled carefully using sustainable development approaches to maintain the quantity and quality of the resources. Hunter (1997) who agreed to this, also mentioned that non-renewable resources need special attention to avoid loss for future generations through greater efficiency of use, reuse and recycling. Similarly the utilization of renewable resources for tourism should be operated within the spectrum of sustainable tourism and subject to suitable capacity.

2.2 Financial resources

According to Vidal (1997) financial strength is an important tool for community development and local communities always seek financial support from outside of their neighbourhood. This assistance from outside can be from either the private or the government sector (Ismail, 2010). Frank and Smith (1999) outlined six types of financial resource categories. These allocations are important to support the rural communities to commercialize their tourism product. It is very difficult for the local communities to establish a strong financial resource without the outsiders' interventions (Vidal, 1997). However, Asnarulkhadi (2003) has mentioned that support from the government is not long-term as the philosophy of community development encourages a self-reliant community.

2.3 Infrastructure resources

Frank and Smith (1999) mentioned that infrastructure resources are normally man-made physical initiatives such as buildings, roads, toilets and communication facilities in the rural areas. These resources are additional facilities that provide comfort for the tourists in the tourism destination. However, Flora (1993) and Sharp et. al., (2002) argued that social infrastructure resource is much more crucial to be developed and can contribute to sustainable development. According to the authors, social infrastructure is a group-level, interactive aspect of organizations or institutions. The level of the networking and communication within the community is regarded as the community's success in creating the social infrastructure. Thus, it can be understood that infrastructure resources are not only man-made tangible facilities but also the intangible social infrastructures.

2.4 Human resources

The importance of human resource in tourism was raised by several scholars such as Pearce (1995), Jithendran and Baum (2000) and Flora (2008). According to Flora (2008), human resources are important to manage other resources owned by the community. The scholar lists individual capability, community training, human health, human value and community leadership as the main attributes that form human resources. Dissimilarly, Frank and Smith (1999) in their community development handbook, stated family and healthy lifestyle, skills, education and training, staff hiring and career planning, effective lawyer selection, labour appreciation and human

rights as being the main determinants of human resources. Pearce (1995) stressed that the human resource development in terms of education and training for future generations should be done by effort collaboration of tourists, tourism professionals and communities. This effort to strengthen the human resource is important in order to achieve sustainable tourism.

3. Method

The data was collected from Kampung Sungai Bumbon, Carey Island. Snowballing (Cooper and Schindler, 1998) and theoretical sampling (Minichiello, 1991) are the combined selection procedures that will be used to carry out this research. 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 naturalistic inquiry technique will provide a set of data which is not biased where the real problem in the community can be understood (Kvale, 1997). The data from the naturalistic inquiry was analyzed using a discourse analysis technique.

4. Analysis and discussion

The results from the in depth interviews revealed that the community heavily depend on the resources around them. Natural resources are found to be the most significant form of materials that the need to operate tourism business and activities. Apart from that, the possession of indigenous knowledge from ancestors is also important in order to polish their unique culture. Generally, the community relies heavily on its surroundings to produce their handicraft. For the mask and sculpture, reddish hardwood called *Nyireh Batu* (*Xylocarpus Moluccensis*) is often used.

“In the wood carving process, first we got to go looking for the raw material to carve, if the wood is suitable to carve, we go ahead. We created this mask using *Nyireh Batu*, there is a scientific name for it - I did not know how to say it - instead of mangrove wood. We must bring *Genso* (chainsaw) machine, cut wood, stack it behind the house, measure how many feet that we need... If anyone gets an order, then the size will be according to the price and if the price is high, we have to do a big one. If the price is low we make a small one. If the price is low, it will be about five hundred Ringgit. When the big order comes, I think it is about four thousand, five thousand. Now we can't make big objects because the wood is slowly dying out...I mean *Nyireh Batu*, we can't find big wood. The mangrove marsh is also disappearing” (Atan Seman, 47 years old, male)

Some of the wood carvers said that the orders to make mask and sculptures are not encouraging. This inconsistency of demand has caused them to be involved in other activities in the village.

“For instance, I don't get orders like others, I have to be like this, I still do wood carving, do and keep. Even though no order, I still do and keep stock. Another thing

is, at my house there are no more masks, we have to do mask, so that when there is an order, we can easily sell. We cannot wait for the order, if you wait for the order; it can be a problem too.” (Kemi, 38 years old, male)

Dissimilarly, for the weaving activity, resource scarcity is not a major issue. The Pandanus leaf can be found easily. However, it is reducing in the vicinity of the village and weavers have to venture farther from the village to gather the leaf.

“No...Not like the *Nyireh Batu*, *Nyireh Batu* is slowly diminishing...Look there...that durian tree is mine...I planted so that one day it will grow and provide me with the wood which is similar to the *Nyireh Batu*. Do you know that the durian tree wood is a hardwood? For now I am happy that there is a lot of *Pandanus* leaf out there. Even around my house, you can find many. But is it slowly disappearing from this area. We have to go far to get some.” (Maznah anak Unyan, 44 years old, female)

According to another wood carver, the scarcity of *Nyireh Batu* is caused by the commercial development of an oil palm plantation owned by a multinational company.

“We have to plant this wood in a place...We don’t want them to destroy more...we have to keep more wood... because this hardwood is difficult to get... Just like us (Mah Meri), the wood is diminishing, but a lot of *anak nyireh* (*young Nyireh*), *ibu nyireh* (*matured Nyireh*) can be found near the mangrove marsh, kind of easy resource I guess... The hardwood is diminishing because there are no more rivers...the river was wider than what it is now, because of this problem we want to save forests but could not because they want the land for planting oil palm. Now I heard they want to cut again. For us, we already told Sime Darby about the trees used for carving...if we take the *anak nyireh* we must ask permission from Sime Darby. For us it is hard to think that every time we enter to get wood, we must seek permission, those days we were not like this.” (Alias Sayor, 35 years old, male)

The community is arguably rich with indigenous knowledge. According to the key informants there is no need for formal education to the next generation as they are practicing the culture every day.

“ My mother never taught me this weaving earlier...I just learnt it myself...I would follow her to collect the *Pandan* leaf and just follow whatever she does. I just do whatever my sister does. Nobody taught me...I can just do this from morning until night...Playing Genang, I learnt it earlier and it is easy now.” (Pinta anak Unyan, 35 years old, female)

Another respondent said that his father has taught him the wood carving skills. Apart from that, he frequently visits other wood carvers’ houses to learn the techniques.

“When I was 12 years old, I started to carve a statue, since then my interest increased. I am learning until now. Many are teaching, not only my father is teaching, I sometimes go to the homes of other men to see how they make the statue. My father has a book which has got all the designs of Mah Meri sculptures. I always refer to the book. Sometimes the idea is from me, this idea is from me (while pointing to a statue of a dragon in his hands).” (Razzie anak Gali, 18 years old, male)

Another respondent who is the son of the Tok Batin said that for him the wood carving is not a main source of income because he was involved in oil palm work.

“I was involved in carving indirectly. Actually I got involved in this thing because it is important to study for inheritance. We need to know the principles of the carvings. I don't know weaving much but it is compulsory to know the basics.. It is a shame if we do not know. I followed good carvers for five years I have participated officially in the learning process. During schooling, carving was for fun and hobby but after schooling; it is a more of a job” (Yahya Sidin, 33 years old, male)

5. Conclusion

The investigation shows that the indigenous community is proud to portray their uniqueness 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 the resources 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.

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