

# Intangible Cultural Heritage as Tourism Product: The Malaysia Experience

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## Abstract

Just as culture is dynamic, a sustainable approach of preserving intangible cultural heritage also goes beyond elevating it to a fixed position in history. It requires contact and cross-fertilisation with modernity to make the heritage values actualise themselves in the present and into the future. Hence, this paper explores a sustainable way of preserving intangible cultural heritage through commercialisation as a tourism product. The study used Malaysia as a case study by first highlighting the impact of tourism to the Malaysian economy and how cultural heritage is contributing to the advancement of the tourism industry in that country. Furthermore, the study identified four intangible cultural heritage items in Malaysia (*Dikir Barat*, *Wau flying*, *Mak Yong Gasing*) and from the viewpoint of the cultural evolution principle, this paper elaborates on how commoditising the cultural heritage into tourism products has been able to preserve them. The findings from the study suggest that intangible cultural heritage can only be sustainably preserved when it is economically viable to the owning community.

**Keywords:** Intangible cultural heritage, cultural tourism, Malay culture, sustainable development

## Introduction

The tourism industry is one of the world's most significant sources of economic outcomes and employment, accounting for 10% of world's GDP, 7% of global trade and one in ten jobs (World Tourism Organization 2018). The year 2012 was a milestone year for tourism, recording over one billion (1.035 billion) international tourists arrivals globally within a year (World Tourism Organization 2013); US\$1.2 trillion direct and indirect impact on the world economy, US\$70 billion in investment and US\$1.2 trillion in exports (WTTC n.d.; Fuller 2013). For six consecutive years (2012-2017), there was a sequence of uninterrupted growth in international tourist arrivals, amounting to around 288 million more international tourists between 2012 and 2017, and an average of 4.5% increase in arrivals per annum (Fig. 1).

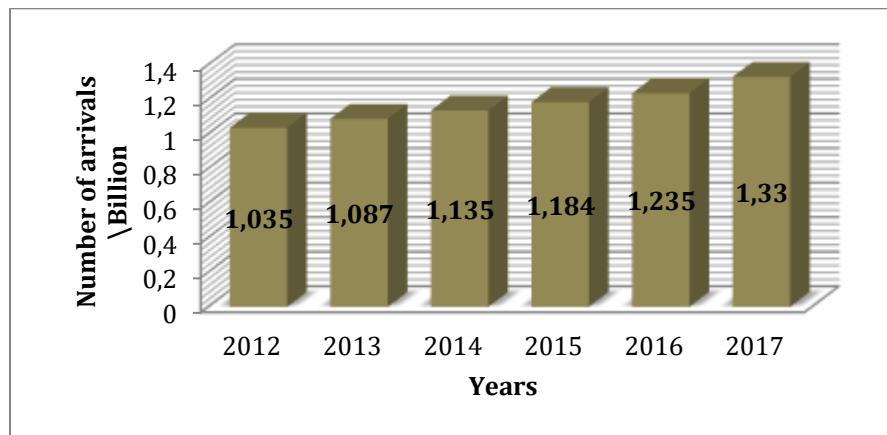
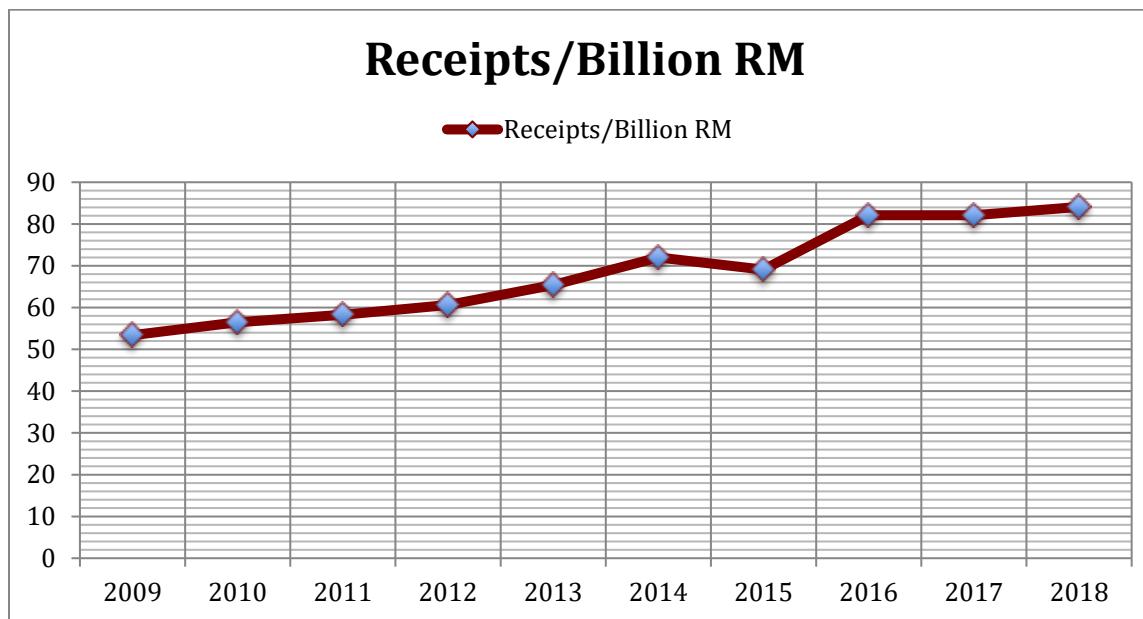


Figure 1: Global international tourist arrivals Source: UNWTO

Between 2012 and 2017, Asia and the Pacific region outperformed all world regions in terms of growth, recording an average of 7.5% increase in international tourist arrivals per year, and accounting for an average of 23.3% of the total number of the world's international tourist arrivals per year. Out of all the sub-regions in Asia and the Pacific, data shows that South-East Asia records the best performing sub-region with an average of over 9% growth (World Tourism Organization, 2013). This performance was due to the good practices in the region such as the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, good visitor management, and the implementation of policies that promote intraregional cooperation and coordination in tourism.

Malaysia, as one of the Asia Pacific and South-East Asia Nations, contributes significantly to the development of tourism within the region and sub-region. According to the Travel and Tourism competitiveness index 2017, Malaysia ranks as 26<sup>th</sup> in the global ranking, 8<sup>th</sup> in the region (Asia & the Pacific) and 2<sup>nd</sup> in South-East Asia (World Economic Forum, 2017). Between the year 2003 and 2013, there was around 143% increase in tourist arrivals in Malaysia (Tourism Malaysia 2014), and within the last ten years (2009 – 2018), the annual international tourism receipts increased by 58%, from RM53.4 billion in 2009 to RM84.1Billion in 2018 (Fig. 2) (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board 2019). This significant increase in tourist receipts makes the tourism industry the second largest contributor to Malaysian's economic growth after the manufacturing sector (Rashidah, 2012; Tourism Malaysia, 2018; Central Bank of Malaysia, 2017).



**Figure 2:** Malaysia's International Tourist arrivals and receipt  
Source: Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (2019).

## Methodology

Based on the aim of this study, which is to explore a sustainable approach for preserving intangible cultural heritage, the study used a descriptive qualitative methodology to interrogate the subject matter using Malaysia's intangible cultural heritage as a case study. Four intangible cultural heritage (two traditional performing arts and two indigenous games) were thus selected for this study and were critically examined using secondary data such as previous fieldwork



reports, literature and documented interviews. The criteria used in selecting the four Malay cultural heritage aspects was based on their existence for the last three decades (30 years).

The data extracted from the secondary sources were analysed, discussed, compared and contrasted using direct interpretation. The mode of direct interpretation was used because of its robust nature to extract and synthesise meaning from different data sources. This approach helps to determine how the indigenous art forms have been able to withstand the changing and dynamic culture, preserved till date, and how they have become a driving force for tourism, leisure and commerce in Malaysia.

### **Malaysia Cultural Heritage Tourism**

One of the new waves that result in the significant contribution of the tourism industry to the Malaysian economy, is cultural heritage tourism, which encompasses travelling to experience places, artefacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past (National Trust, 2014). According to Datuk Seri Dr Ng Yen Yen, the formal chairperson of the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, culture and heritage tourism is a new segment that is boosting Malaysian tourism. She said, the new tourism product (culture and heritage tourism) “*is putting Malaysia on the world map as one of the destinations for culture and heritage experience*” (Yen, 2013); and this is due to the rich history and national cultural heritage values.

Studies consistently show that cultural heritage travellers stay longer and spend more money than other kinds of travellers (National Trust, 2014), which is evidence that cultural heritage is no longer a mere memory or a cultural reference. The term cultural heritage is now moving towards broader and wider scenarios, where it often becomes the driving force for commerce, business, leisure and politics (Green lines Institute, 2013). Hence, the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage have become a central topic in international cultural policy, and one such example is the inclusion of cultural heritage into the sustainable development agenda by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Boccardi & Duvelle, 2013).

To achieve sustainable cultural heritage tourism development requires maintaining and conserving the cultural heritage that provides tourists with a quality experience. Unfortunately, the intangible aspect of cultural heritage, also known as the living cultural assets, has received less attention for decades. This neglect is due to globalisation and the changing and dynamic culture, which leads to a dying interest to sustain and practice preservation. Many believe that intangible cultural heritage is primitive and has no economic benefit, and therefore, shows little or no concern towards the extinction of these valuable assets.

Just recently are awareness created among nations that the living cultural assets (intangible heritage) are also a cultural richness that should be cherished and preserved (Alivizatou 2012; Alivizatou-Barakou et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2013). The 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, adopted by the UNESCO, has successfully spurred many of its member nations to develop projects that safeguard intangible heritage. One of the nations to address the issue of safeguarding intangible heritage is the Malaysia government, which, by passing “The National Heritage Act” in 2005, showed the value attached thereto. This Act provides for the conservation and preservation of both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage and its commodification as a tourism product.



## **Malay Intangible Heritage Preservation and commodification as Tourism Product**

Malay intangible cultural heritage has gone through several stages in its evolution, shaped by the cross-cultural exchange of culture and a number of foreign influences from the India sub-continent, the Middle East, China, Portugal, and other parts of the Malay Archipelago. Even though the first layer of native ideas and traditions has remained strong till date, the Hindu and Buddhist cultures of the Indians and Chinese had a great influence on Malay culture. The main reason was that the Hindu-Buddhist ideas have some affinity with indigenous ideas and art genre; hence the natives accepted them to form the second layer of culture (Aung et al., 2005).

The third layer of culture was formed between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Malay world became a centre for trade and indirectly a religious proselytising area. Traders from India and the Middle East brought a new religion (Islam) (Yousof, 2004), which was embraced by the majority of the Malay people. This rise in Islamic awareness and the increasing state of religious consciousness among the Malays, questioned the permissibility of the arts, customs and culture of the Malays that were previously Hindu-Buddhist in nature (Aziz and Olalere, 2013).

The Intangible cultural practices such as the performing arts, traditional games and healing practices were part of the conflicting indigenous practices that were contrary to the teachings of their newfound faith. However, instead of abandoning those cultural legacies, the Malay people now legitimise the rituals attached to the practices by integrating elements of the newfound faith into their cultural practices without losing its uniqueness. According to Aziz (2013), most of the Malay intangible cultural heritage practices have been able to withstand the test of time by transforming them from ritualistic practices to leisure or pastime activities within the Malay community.

However, to ensure that national identity and pride are sustained, the Malaysia Government established the Department of National Heritage, under the Tourism and Culture Ministry, to oversee and promote the continued existence of the intangible heritage (Nasuruddin, 2017). One of the successful attempts to rejuvenate intangible heritage is making it economically viable by sponsoring events and performances that showcase the heritage values to both local and foreign tourists. Some of the well-preserved indigenous performing arts and pastime activities that have become the driven forces for tourism, leisure and commerce in Malaysia include: *Dikir Barat*, *Mak Yong*, *Menora*, *Gasing* (top-spinning), *Kite flying (Wau)*.

### **Dikir Barat**

*Dikir Barat* is a traditional performing art that is still gaining popularity and recognition both nationally and internationally. It is a choral singing competition, a form of entertainment that incorporates singing, movement, poetry, and music; usually performed by two competing groups of ten to fifteen members each (Ingram et al., 2004). Traditionally, *Dikir Barat* is usually performed during occasions such as weddings, religious festivals and harvest seasons where the performers sit cross-legged on the platform, singing and accompanying it with a rhythmic clapping and energetic body movements (Fig. 3). While *Dikir Barat* is believed to have originated from Kelantan state in Malaysia (Malm, 1974), some researchers argued that the musical art form (*Dikir Barat*) spread from southern Thailand to Kelantan where it is not just localised but also spread to other parts of Malaysia (Ho 2015; Osman, 1999).



**Figure 3:** Young *Dikir Barat* performers  
Source: <http://www.magicalwonderlande.com/product/malay-dikir-barat/>

In recent times, the musical storytelling (*dikir barat*) has been extracted out of its folk roots, been transformed and has crossed the borders of traditions and modernity. *Dikir barat* has now gone beyond mere entertainment; it is now being used as a vehicle for social commentary, aimed at stimulating discussion on trending issues and also a form of educating audiences. This transformation has played a significant role in sustaining the traditional art form among the Malay community and also promoting it to the outside world. Hence, *dikir barat* is now being performed at live events that bring together both national and international tourists. Besides, *dikir barat* albums (audio and video) are now popularly sold in Malaysia and beyond, which makes the traditional art form a marketable cultural commodity (Halid 2014). For example, Mahavera (2006) reported that around twenty (20) *dikir barat* albums were released by prominent production house in 2006, and this keeps increasing over the years.

### Kite (Wau) flying

A kite is called a wau in Malay language, and it is one of the oldest indigenous games in the Malay culture. Kites are intricately decorated with floral motifs and traditionally flown by men (Aziz and Olalere, 2013). There are various types of traditional Malay kites or wau, each named according to the shape of the tail, for example the Moon Kite (Wau Bulan), which is perhaps the most famous kite due to its huge size (often around 3.5m in height), it is intricate in design and makes a buzzing sound and has great stability when flown (Fig. 4). Other traditional Malay kites include the Cat Kite (Wau Kucing) used by the national flag carrier (Malaysia Airlines) as the company's corporate logo, the Bird Kite (Wau Burung), the Peacock Kite (Wau Merak), and the Quail Kite (Wau Burung Puyuh).



**Figure 4:** Moon Kite (Wau Bulan)  
Source: <http://malaysiangames.blogspot.com/p/wau-and-galah-panjang.html>

Kite making and flying have been a source of income to many Malay communities, and the new wave is its impact on tourism in Malaysia. The traditional game (kite flying) has been one of the major tourist attractions in Malaysia with several national and international kite-flying competitions hosted in Malaysia yearly. Examples of such competitions are the internationally acclaimed *Pasir Gudang International Kite Festival* being held consecutively for over twenty years in Johor, Malaysia, and the *Kelantan International Kites Festival* held annually since 1982 (over 35 years).

According to Zill (2019) and Malaysia.Travel (2019), these prestigious events attract hundreds of thousands of visitors from all over the world and international participation from around 30 countries is common. The continued success of these events has been able to promote kite-flying activities, nurture creativity in kite making, and has also brought a positive socio-economic impact to the immediate communities.

### **Mak Yong (dramatic-dance)**

*Mak yong* is an ancient dance-drama performance that incorporates the elements of the ancient animistic rituals, dance movements and acting, vocal and instrumental music inspired by Thai-Buddhist texts. The dance drama is traditionally performed either as a form of entertainment or as a ritual to pay homage to teachers (*semah guru*), for initiation and healing (Yousof, 2017; Yousof, 2004); however, the latter is usually more elaborate than that staged for entertainment. According to Farok Bin Zakaria, one of Malaysia's famous performers, *mak yong* reflects the important part of Malay culture right from the costumes and the melodious songs to the dialogues and the intrinsic body movements (Fig. 5) (Poorten, 2015). The art form is unique in every way with not just superficial contents but also inner symbolic and spiritual meanings.



**Figure 5:** Farok's Mak yong group performance  
Source: University of Malaysia Kelantan

The genre (*mak yong*) was once near extinction, partly as a result of declining participation due to modernisation and religious factors. However, following the recognition of the art form by the UNESCO in 2005 as "a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," the government of Malaysia was commissioned to revive the intangible cultural heritage through the establishment of training facilities that supports teaching, research, documenting and promoting of the art form at both the national and international levels (Yousof, 2017).

Hence, in recent years, the performance has been tailored towards entertainment with the infusion of modern elements, and younger generations have regained interest in the traditional art form both nationally and internationally. For example in November 2015, the Bunga Emas Seri Temenggong (*mak yong* performers) performed at the Beijing Central Music Conservatory in China (Poorten, 2015).

### Gasing (top-spinning)

Gasing or top spinning is an indigenous game commonly played by men in the East Coast communities in Malaysia. The discus-like plate (see Fig.6a) is usually flung into the air while a rope wound around top spins it (see Fig.6b). The top is then scooped off the ground (using a wooden bat), transferred to a wooden rode and the contestants and spectators watch the handcrafted top spinning to determine which one spins for the most prolonged period (see Fig.6c).

Over the years, the traditional game developed from just a pastime or leisure activities engaged in after harvest, into an indigenous sport. Each community or state now has a gasing team, and competitions are often organized among those teams, which takes place not only in Malaysia, but also outside the country in countries such as in Dubai and the UK (Teoh, 2014). This is evidence that the traditional game has been fully commercialized as tourism product both nationally and internationally.



**Figure 6:** Gasing game  
Source: (Teoh 2014)

### Conclusion

This study shows that culture can only be revitalised and sustained when the owning community considers the cultural tradition to be of significant importance. Unfortunately, many intangible cultural heritages are not appreciated by the society that owns them because the conservative approaches mostly used, deprives the heritage of a chance to actualise itself in the present. Hence, the cultural heritages look obsolete and irrelevant to the younger generation who show little or no interest in preserving them. Hence, this paper argued that a sustainable approach is needed where intangible cultural heritages are transformed by allowing cross-fertilisation with modernity, or in other words, allowing them to be shaped by the religious and cultural dynamics of its surrounding. This sustainable approach, according to the cultural evolutionist principle, is not a destruction of cultural heritage but a way of coming to terms with it by keeping in touch with the existing situation, condition and taste (Phillips & Steiner, 1999). This approach ensures that



intangible cultural heritage remains economically viable and thus, significant to the society that owns it.

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