



Commoditising indigenous crafts to enhance tourism experience: A case study on Mambong Pottery, Malaysia

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Abstract

Heritage values, which are results of systemic interaction of culture with the environment, are being negatively affected lately by globalization. As society continues to adjust their way of life to meet-up with the global trend and widely held life patterns, aspects of traditional culture decline and as a result, many cultural objects are seen as primitive and obsolete. However, evidence shows that by enhancing the original meaning and images of cultural objects, they can be transformed into modern products that meet the needs of the contemporary consumer market. Hence, this study seeks to explore how indigenous crafts can be transformed into commodities (such as souvenirs) that would help enhance the tourism experience. The study employed a deductive and practice-led approach, using the Mambong pottery in Malaysia as a case study. Mambong pottery was used for this study because it is one of the oldest and still existing indigenous crafts in Malaysia. The experimental research used the *Conceptual Cultural Design Model* to transform the selected indigenous crafts (pottery wares) into tangible mediums (souvenirs) that promote the cultural aspects to the visitors and also convey the essence of tourism destination to potential tourists. This approach is not only a viable way of enhancing tourism, it is also a sustainable way of preserving indigenous crafts and creating entrepreneurial opportunities.

Keywords: Cultural design, indigenous craft, Malay heritage, souvenir, tourism

Introduction

One of the well-known activities and important leisure pursuit of many people during vacations and trips is shopping (Oh *et al.*, 2004). Apart from visiting tourist attractions, many tourists purposefully seek enjoyable shopping opportunities as a familiar activity in an unfamiliar environment (Olalere, 2017). In Malaysia, shopping is one of the major activities engaged by tourists. As illustrated in Figure 1, around 30-35 per cent of the total annual receipts between 2015 and 2018 were spent on shopping (Tourism Malaysia, 2018; Strategic Planning Division Tourism Malaysia, 2019c, 2019a, 2019b).

Even though the complexities, practices, and meanings of shopping have not been well understood (Swanson and Timothy, 2012), Studies shows that shopping in terms of souvenir is one of the distinctive reasons why people travel to other places (Swanson, 2004; Lunyai, Run & Atang, 2008; Brennan & Savage, 2012). For example, record shows that over 80 per cent of tourist arrivals in Malaysia between 2016 to 2018 purchased souvenir or handicraft as part of their shopping items (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 2019; Strategic Planning Division Tourism Malaysia, 2019a). In the first quarter of 2019 (January-March), souvenir was the top shopping items purchased, with 82.3% of the tourist arrivals engaging in souvenir purchase (Strategic Planning Division Tourism Malaysia, 2019c).

According to Brenna and Savage (2012), souvenirs are central to the tourism experience, because, they are embedded with strong semiotic messages that transform intangible experiences into tangible memories. Besides, they enable us to freeze a passing moment in

an extraordinary reality and to re-live the experience in routine time and space (Collins-Kreiner & Zins, 2011). Hence, the host community or tourism destinations can economically benefit from souvenir design, production and sales.

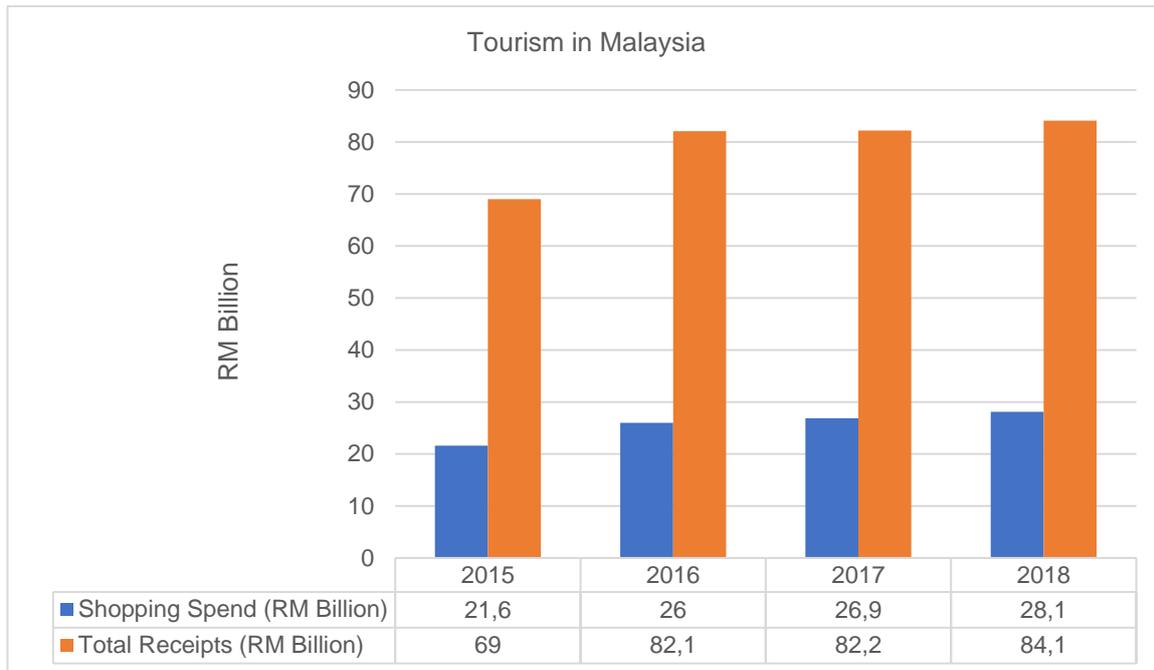


Figure 1. Total Receipt and Shopping spend in Malaysia
 Source: (Strategic Planning Division Tourism Malaysia, 2019c, 2019b, 2019a)

Therefore, commoditising the cultural objects as souvenirs is a potential way of promoting cultural aspects to visitors and also conveying the essence of tourism destination to potential consumers. Commercialising indigenous art and crafts as souvenirs (which is an important component of tourism products) can play a significant role in building cross-cultural relations, providing immediate employment, creating entrepreneurial opportunities and bringing development to rural or neglected communities.

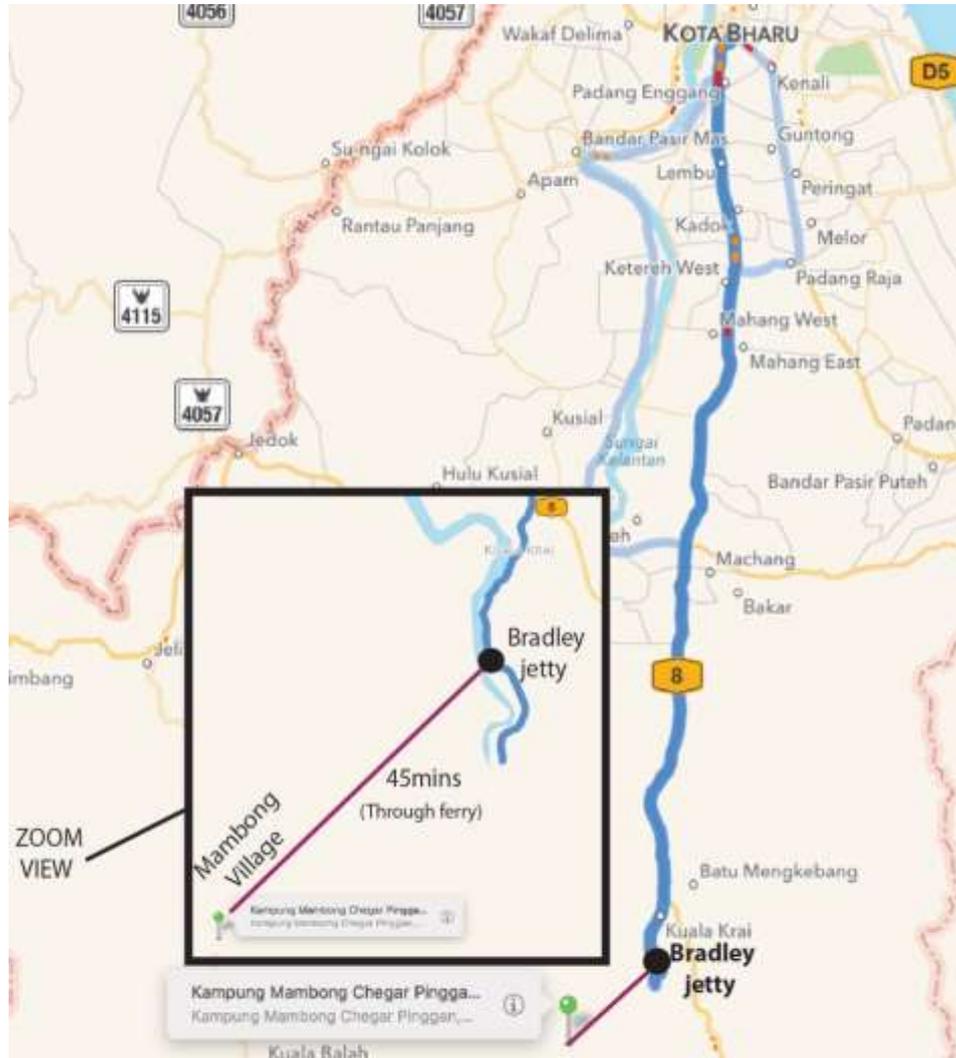
Hence, this study seeks to explore the meaning of cultural objects and how cultural objects can be transformed into higher-value alternative items that meet contemporary needs. The Mambong pottery in Malaysia was used as a case study, and the study employed the *Conceptual Cultural Design Model* by Lin (2007) to extract the cultural features, and transform the cultural features into contemporary products (souvenirs) that meet contemporary market needs and tourist expectations.

Overview of Mambong Pottery

The Kelantan state in Malaysia, regarded as the cradle of Malay cultural heritage (Nasir, 2011), is known for its unique tangible and intangible cultural heritage. One of the tangible heritage value is the Mambong pottery, which has been in existence for over one hundred and fifty (150) years. The indigenous pottery is named after the village (Mambong) where the pottery wares are being produced. The Mambong village is located along the Ulu river in the Kuala Krai district of Kelantan state, Malaysia (Fig. 2). The village can only be connected by boat or ferry from *Bradley* jetty at Sungai Galas, Kuala Krai, and from the jetty to Mambong village takes nearly 45 minutes along the Kelantan River.

The pottery of Mambong is the only existing heritage pottery in Kelantan and among the oldest potteries in Malaysia (Tajul, 2007). According to (Tajul, Ramli & Mohd, 2011), the craft skill was inherited from Mainunah Binti Puteh (Tok Bara), who started pottery making in 1868 (19th

Century) and later transferred the craftsmanship skills to her daughter, Animah (also known as Mek Yah). According to Mohd Nawi, who grew up in Mambong village (personal communication, November 23, 2013), Mambong pottery was first initiated to meet the personal utility functions within the local community such as the *Belanga* (often used for cooking curry and rice), *Buyung* (used has water container) and *Kukusan Tanah* (Steamer pot) (Fig. 3).



Kota Bharu to Kuala Krai (Bradley Jetty): 1hr30mins (by Road)
Kuala Krai (Bradley Jetty) to Mambong Village: 45mins (by Ferry)

Figure 2. Map showing the location of Kampong Mambong



Figure 3. Mambong pottery wares
Source: The Photos were taken by the author at Mambong village

Therefore, due to the invention as utility items, the pottery craft has played an important role in the daily life of people in Mambong village and other neighbouring communities. Besides this functional aspect, the pottery wares are also embodied with symbolic expressions (motifs) that have rich aesthetic values (Tajul, Ramli & Mohd, 2011; Ab. Aziz *et al.*, 2014). However, the younger generation in Mambong village now shows less or no interest in producing the heritage craft, which may result in its extinction.

Research shows that the limited interest shown by the younger generation might be as a result of the slow process of producing the pottery wares using the inherited traditional method. This method manipulates a lump of clay to form vessel shape by squeezing or rolling the clay into long fillets, and then built up to establish the vessel circumference, while successive clay applied increases the height gradually (Fig. 4). A study by Smith (1967), as quoted by Arnold (1985), also shows that potters using this traditional method often spend averagely one and half hour a day for a week to properly shape a vessel using hand modelling technique (coiling and pinching).

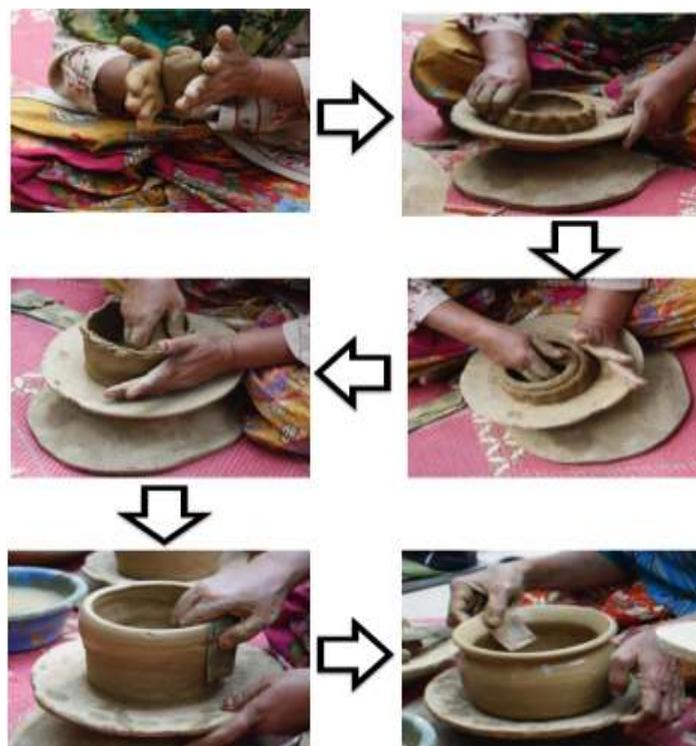


Figure 4. Hand modelling technique of Mambong

Another reason for the decreasing number of people engaged in the pottery making in Mambong is the declined economic value of the pottery wares. The pottery wares, which were originally utility items, are now being seen as primitive and no longer meet contemporary needs and functions, which relatively reduced the demand (Siti Mariam, 2014). Lately, the Malaysia Handicraft Development Corporation (Kraftangan) made several attempts to revitalise Mambong heritage pottery by offering financial aid and incentives to support reproductive production. However, the attempts have yielded no reasonable outcome (Ramly Bin Isa, personal communication, March 1, 2014). This is because the previously functional heritage wares (Mambong) no longer serve the functional purpose but just a mere display at homes (Siti Mariam, 2014). Thus, in the midst of tradition and culture that involves yearning for improvement, the attempt to sustain the heritage pottery wares through reproductive production could not achieve the desired cultural continuity.

In spite the fact that the traditional wares produced are out-dated and no longer suit the original functional purpose, evidence shows that the heritage pottery wares are embedded with cultural features (motifs) that have rich aesthetic values and timeless beauty across culture and time. According to Tajul et al. (2011), the Mambong pottery possesses decorative motifs that have a realistic aesthetic concept of art in Malay, and these aesthetic values reflect the beauty of the soul and culture of Malay society (Hussin et al., 2012).

The decorative motifs on Mambong heritage pottery are a combination of geometric and organic patterns. The basic visual elements used to create the patterns are dotted elements, lines, and colours, which are commonly arranged in a square structural unit (Jamal, 1992) and circular frame (Siti Zainon, 1986). According to Silah et al. (2013), square shape represents a symbol of earth, materiality and boundary between the internal and external world in which human behaviours have their limitation and guide. While the circle, based on the moon shape, symbolises the “heart,” which in Malay art, depicts “God’s existence”.

In addition, the organic elements used in the traditional motifs, such as *bunga cengkeh* and *lawang* are used in Malay society as herb and spice in traditional cooking. These show that symbolism, which is part of the Malay aesthetic principles, is influenced by the Malay customs,

religion, daily life activities and nature. Thus, it is important to preserve these heritage values by transforming them into higher-value alternative items that meet contemporary needs, enhance contemporary product identity in the global market, and also enhance individual consumer experience (product value) (Handa, 1999; Yair, Tomes & Press, 1999; Yair, Press and A., 2001). Moreover, embedding these cultural features into contemporary products will demonstrate the recognition of the past and the things that tell its story (Tanselle, 1998).

Methodology

This study aims to explore how Mambong pottery wares can be commoditised as souvenir. To achieve the aim, the experimental study employed a studio practice research method, which includes pictorial data, measured-drawings and practice-led evaluation of the process. This method was applied because it is a naturalistic approach for answering research questions (Silah *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, the study was guided by the *Conceptual Cultural Design Model* developed by Lin (2007), which has three (3) stages (Fig. 5).

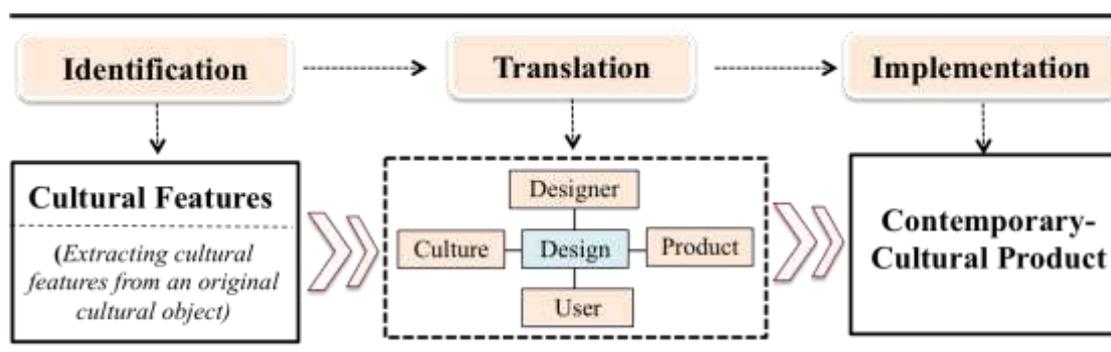


Figure 5. Conceptual cultural design model
Source: Lin (2007)

The identification stage involves identifying and extracting cultural features or values from original cultural objects such as the shape, form, motifs or patterns. To identify and extract the cultural features on Mambong pottery wares, photographic data (Pictorial data) of the heritage pottery wares were collected by visiting the cottage pottery in Mambong village, Kuala Krai; the two oldest Museums in Malaysia (National Museum in Kuala Lumpur and Perak Museum in Taiping); along with the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur and the five (5) museums in Kelantan (Muzium Negeri Kelantan; Muzium Kraftangan; Muzium D'Raja; Muzium Islam and Muzium Adat Istiadat DiRaya Kelantan).

The photographic data were collected using a digital camera. During the photographic data collection, the researcher ensured that the level of the lens is approximately the mid-point, and the lighting of the photographs are kept natural. This is to avoid distorting the relative proportions. However, other views were considered for decorative features, as recommended by Shepard (1985). A total of seventy-nine (79) pictorial data of heritage wares were collected through the judgmental sampling method (that is; taking the photograph of only pottery wares identified to be Mambong heritage pottery). However, after conducting a structured observation and carefully selecting the works, only 24 pottery wares were finally selected as the sample.

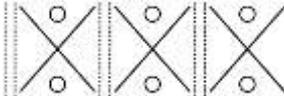
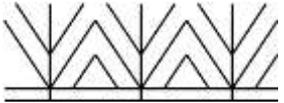
The dimension, structure and proportion of the wares were documented while the decorative motifs were measured and re-drawn using AutoCAD and Adobe Illustrator software. This documentation approach was used in view of Shepard (1985), who suggested that drawings are a better illustrative method for visual pattern analysis of decorative motifs on pottery vessels. Burns (2004) also opines that this approach is good for historical documentation for future usage. At the translation stage, the documented features were transformed into design

elements, while the implementation stage combines the design-knowledge gained on the cultural objects with the sense of design to create contemporary cultural products (souvenirs).

Results and Discussion

The cultural features identified are the shapes or forms (Fig.3) and decorative motifs/patterns found on the pottery wares (Table 1). The decorative patterns comprise of elements such as dots, line, crescent and star shape. It is noticeable that most of the elements are arranged in odd numbers (1, 3, 5, 7, etc.). This is often assumed to be associated with their Islamic belief that God is single and therefore pleased with odd or single numbers.

Table 1. Motifs/patterns extracted from Mambong pottery wares

No.	Origin of the Motif	Motifs	Basic Subject Matter Applied
1	Buyung 		Chicken's Head
2	Buyung 		Swastika
3	Buyung 		Bamboo shoot (<i>Pucuk rebung</i>)
4	Periuk Tanah 		Centipede & Anise
5	Periuk Kukusan 		Bull's Head with horns
6	Buyung 		Natural elements geometric style (E.g. Bunga cengkeh & moon)

Idea generation

Product ideas (souvenirs) were generated using documented heritage features. The souvenir products developed at this stage includes a series of Mambong pottery shapes transformed into alternative contemporary products such as pen holder, lampshade, fridge magnet, trophy and table lamp (Fig.6). The designs were created by following the dimensions and proportions of the original shapes of the Mambong pottery wares.



Figure 6. Series of souvenir design inspired by Mambong pottery shapes

A series of creative mugs were also developed with the heritage patterns embedded as decorations motifs (Fig. 7). Figure 7a is a handle-free mug with five fins at two sides, intended to act as a cooling feature when using the mug. The shape of the mug and the two-compartment feature are inspired by one of the Mambong pottery wares (*Periuk Kukusan*). Figure 7b is a double-layered wall mug. The double-layered wall is introduced to prevent heat transfer by conduction. Figure 7c is a handle-free mug with three fins and a tip at two opposite sides. The two tips are expected to ease the drinking process, while the fins are a decorative feature to enhance the appearance of the mug.

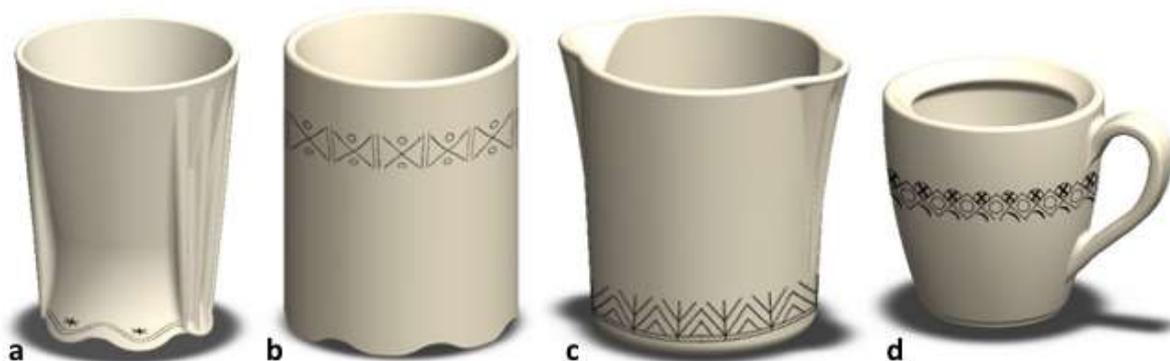


Figure 7. Mugs with heritage motifs

Lastly, Figure 7d is a training mug designed as a tool for social conditioning. The concept of the mug is to make it only usable when holding with the right hand. This concept is in-line with the socio-cultural norms and dining etiquette across Asian, Africa and Middle East (Prakash, 2012). The right-hand rule in these communities establishes a sense of hygiene and respect, where people are expected to eat (including holding cup and utensil), shake hands, give and receive with the right hand.

Conclusion

Culture plays a significant role in designing contemporary, socially acceptable products. According to Lin (2007), adding cultural value creates the core of product value, and on the other hand, design can be used as a motivation to push cultural development forward. Thus,



this study has been able to encode cultural features in design practices by first extracting cultural features (shapes & patterns) from Mambong pottery wares and transforming them into souvenir products. This approach can sustainably preserve heritage values and promote cultural aspects to tourists. Besides, the local community can economically benefit from souvenir production and sales.

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