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# Cultural Authenticity and the Impacts of Cultural Tourism in Malaysian Borneo

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*“In many of the places where there are well run travel agencies... we won't put on a loincloth just to dance for you because you're there... If [the indigenous people] want to dance, they have occasion to dance, we enjoy, if not we say 'forget about it.'” – Tour Guide in Sarawak*

The narrative surrounding tourism is not generally very positive. The word “tourist” often calls to mind unfortunate characteristics such as brightly colored shirts, socks and sandals, complemented by ever-present cameras. It's not uncommon to hear travelers express concern about “looking like a tourist”. Less common is a discourse surrounding the people who work together to create the tourist industry, a group that includes both the indigenous people referenced in this paper's opening quote, and the guide who said it. I was curious about both types of person – and how each's involvement in the tourist industry affected them. Even when indigenous groups retain the autonomy to decide if and when they want to perform, how does the presence and interest of tourists impact indigenous culture?

I approached this question through a case study of cultural tourism in Malaysian Borneo, and discovered that the question of authenticity at tourist sites is closely bound up with Borneo's colonial history and the subsequent development of the cultural tourist industry. The presence of a cultural tourism industry in Malaysian Borneo creates a series of complex implications for the indigenous groups that the industry is based on. Tourists traveling to Borneo are most attracted to the activities and sites that they believe offer an authentic experience, but their perceptions of “authentic” are often based on an outdated and unrepresentative colonial narrative, causing a proliferation of sites that represent that image of indigeneity. The resulting cultural tourism industry offers many benefits - including opportunities for participants to celebrate and benefit from their indigenous identities, and incentives for the retention of indigenous culture – but also contribute to the commodification and misrepresentation of indigenous culture.

## **METHODS**

In May and June of 2015 I flew to Malaysian Borneo to investigate tourists' experiences with Dayak (indigenous) cultures there, the extent to which those experiences are authentic or staged and the ways in which cultural tourism impacts the preservation of indigenous culture. I spent six weeks conducting an ethnographic investigation in Sarawak and Sabah (the two states that comprise Malaysian Borneo). I used unstructured, semi-structured interviews and participant observation to explore my research questions, which were funded through a University of Puget Sound Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences summer research grant.

As I quickly learned, one of the particularly interesting, and challenging, elements of studying tourists and tourism is that your subject population is - by definition - mobile. Many of the tourists I encountered in Borneo spent just a few days in each location before moving on, making it difficult to build the sustained relationships and trust that are historically the foundation of a successful ethnographic interview. Although it was easy for me to let people know that I was in Malaysia to do research (one of the standard icebreaker questions among travelers was "why are you in Borneo?") this transient, impermanent vibe made it harder for me to conduct regular interviews. There's something inherently uncomfortable about asking someone you've only known one or two days if you can "interview" them - to say nothing of recording a conversation - so many of my oral interactions with other tourists came from casual, unstructured conversations in hostels and other common areas ("where did you go today?" "oh, was the cultural village good?" "what else do you want to do here?"). Although I did conduct a few semi-structured recorded interviews, I gathered much more ethnographic data about tourists through these informal interviews than through formal, structured channels.

Through those interactions, I got a feel for tourists' expectations and perceptions of their trip. To investigate indigeneity, I employed similar strategies, including interviewing guides and conducting significant participant-observation at longhouses, cultural villages and other cultural sites. It was often difficult to interview indigenous people directly, due to language barriers and strongly engrained beliefs about what the "role" of the tourist was. Despite my explanations that I was a student studying tourism, I had no physical attributes to distinguish me from a typical tourist, and I found that it often made people uncomfortable and less forthcoming if I tried to actively transcend that role ("why are you asking me these questions?"). In a way, that was just as helpful, as their discomfort let me know which actions, questions and interests strayed from typical tourist behavior. However, to address that limitation, I have also relied on other ethnographers' descriptions of indigenous life and customs to more accurately characterize what "authentic" indigeneity is among groups like the Iban, Bidayuh, Penan, Melenau and Rungus.

### **CONTEXTUALIZING CULTURAL TOURISM IN BORNEO:**

As with many colonizer/colonized relationships, the British only needed to set foot on Borneo to change the trajectories of Dayak culture. Practically, many of those changes were accomplished through the exchange of goods (dogs, iron etc.) that permanently transformed indigenous lifestyles. As a result, these transformations tended to follow trade routes. As the colonial presence in Borneo pushed indigenous groups away from traditional practices and activities<sup>1</sup> toward participation in trade-based economies, British colonists simultaneously perpetuated a narrative among Europeans that portrayed Borneo as an alluring, dangerous land. This narrative of misty jungles and wild animals – and people -- created a European interest in

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<sup>1</sup> Typically hunting and gathering, and in some cases, limited subsistence agriculture.

Borneo that would eventually lead to the creation of touristic sites adhering to the colonial descriptions of an appealing and wild “lost world”.

The first British contact with Borneo came in 1842 when the Sultan of Brunei gifted present-day Sarawak (the Western state of Malaysian Borneo) to British explorer James Brooke, signaling the beginnings of a firm British presence in the region (Pringle 1970; 3). James Brooke appointed himself the first “White Rajah” of Sarawak, and in 1868 he maintained British presence there by bequeathing both his land and his title to his nephew Charles. Twenty years later, the British government finally afforded Sarawak formal British protection, but Charles Brooke remained firmly in charge of its internal affairs. Following his death in 1879, Charles’ son Vyner became the third white Rajah, but he ceded Sarawak to the British Crown in 1946 following the Japanese occupation during World War II (Pringle 1970; 4). Sabah, the Eastern state had seen a British presence since 1882 when the British North Borneo Company took control, but in 1963 merged with Sarawak, Malaya and Singapore to create the contemporary Independent Federation of Malaysia (Pringle 1970; 4).

Throughout the period of both James and Charles’ rule indigenous people were slowly exposed to outside influences in a pattern that typically followed trade routes (Pringle 1970; 322) (Sellato 1994; 164). Often communities located on the outskirts of forests, or at the mouths of rivers were the first to encounter Europeans. They incrementally picked up Western influences and then passed them on to other, more secluded, groups located closer to the interior (Sellato 1994; 164). It took some time for the impacts of this European presence to become entirely clear. In the first several years of increased British presence in the region the “more remote upriver people remained committed to a tradition which emphasized migration and headhunting [while] the downriver people were far sooner exposed to new outside influences” (Pringle 1970; 322).

The “peripheral” bands who ranged closer to trade centers would become commercial collectors for the British while the interior groups, without direct contact with markets, maintained their cultural autonomy for longer periods of time (Sellato 1994; 164).

The European presence eventually impacted the behavior of even the most remote Dayaks. As the peripheral groups gradually became settled farming communities they passed the job of commercial collecting to other nomads farther upriver, increasing those groups’ Westernization and contact with outside influences (Sellato 1994; 164). In this way, the mutual economic benefits of colonial trade networks facilitated the continued westernization of indigenous peoples. That exposure forced many indigenous groups to abandon traditional ways of earning a living, and assume roles and professions based in the new European economy.

As the increasing British presence in Borneo affected indigenous lifestyles, the colonizers were simultaneously sending home word of their travels. Their stories and letters contributed to an image of Borneo as a sort of “lost world”. They described a savage land covered with thick, verdant jungles and populated by “uncivilized” tribes. In short, the Borneo of the 1860s British correspondence became the kind of place that cemented the masculinity of any European explorer who survived long enough to write home about it. In his book *Ten Years in Sarawak* Charles Brooke uses that kind of adventurous language to describe his experiences in Borneo. He describes “wild and numerous Dyak [Dayak] tribes” and “vegetation luxurious to excess” (Brooke 1866; 6). Although he also highlights the difficulty of life in Sarawak (the oppressive heat, the prevalence of snakes) he nevertheless gives it an attractive sheen by telling stories of rains that render the atmosphere “excessively delightful” and a Dayak chief who welcomed Charles and his traveling companions with “a smiling amiable countenance” (Brooke 1866; 7, 19).

Accounts from Brooke and his contemporaries filtered into the popular culture of their sending countries so that, taken together, they created impressions of the East as a tempting and savage land that circulated throughout 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century British and French society (Said 1993; 62). Accordingly, those popular representations of Colonial holdings in the East are found throughout the literature of this time. The character Sir Thomas Bertram of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* is understood to have achieved both wealth and elevated social status because of his overseas holdings (allure), while *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason (Mr. Rochester's deranged wife) is West Indian, reinforcing the idea that the people of the colonies are either wild, demented or both (savagery) (Said 1993; 62). Those two characters each represent one half of those colonial representations of the East – they simultaneously portray it as a beautiful, advantageous place *and* a wild and risky land. The cumulative effect of this narrative creates what Edward W. Said calls the “structure of attitude and reference” that reinforced the wild allure of the East in the minds of the European public (Said 1993; 62).

As we've progressed from Austen's day, the Western fascination with the East hasn't diminished. Rather, “the old divisions between colonizer and colonized have re-emerged in what is often referred to as the North-South relationship”. Western visitors still come East, but now they do so as tourists, not colonists (Said 1993; 17). Contemporary tour agents and companies draw on the lingering influence of colonial representations by repurposing the “lost world” narrative in their marketing (although they often replace the “danger” aspect with images of mystery). Contemporary Southeast Asian cultures “are packaged to meet the place-myths created by tourist representations. The region is oftentimes constructed as a tropical and exotic paradise, with images of sultry women, long white-sand beaches, and mystical and ancient relics” intended to draw visitors from abroad (Leinbeck 2000; 205).

In Borneo, this pattern holds. Tourist literature frequently includes imagery of pristine beaches, verdant jungles and women in traditional dress. That transition (colonial imagery to touristic marketing) is representative of the lingering impact of European colonists in Borneo. Their presence not only disrupted traditional indigenous lifestyles, but allowed European explorers to disseminate a carefully curated image of Dayak culture among their contemporaries at home. The persistence of that narrative in today's tourist dialogue shows that it has continued to influence Euro-American impressions and expectations of the "East" and inform their desires for their own experiences. That interest has created an industry that has both positive and negative impacts on indigenous culture in Borneo.

For one thing, as Malaysia has embraced this interest and continued to modernize, the Iban and other indigenous groups in Malaysian Borneo, "have been subjected to successively more assertive administrations... and assailed by countless influences all from 'another world'" (Sutlive Jr 1978; 171). Among many Iban this is creating anxiety "about what they perceive as the marginality" that has resulted from the increasing westernization and development in Borneo (Sutlive Jr 1978; 171). Participation in the tourist industry offers indigenous groups a way to combat that marginality by providing an earning opportunity that celebrates and pivots on unique Dayak heritage. By working in the tourist industry, indigenous groups like the Iban hold jobs that are both compatible with contemporary lifestyles, and that they are uniquely qualified for. Members of indigenous groups are thus able to not only benefit from their respective ethnicities, but also highlight the economic benefits of respecting and preserving indigenous culture to tourists, elected officials and other Dayaks.

While the tourist demand provides an economic incentive for the government to invest in preserving indigenous culture (and that entices indigenous individuals themselves to retain or

relearn a wide variety of cultural activities or attributes) it also disproportionately emphasizes the aspects of the culture that tourists are expecting to see, often those stemming from the colonial narrative established by explorers like Brooke.

### **ORGANIZATION OF THE INDUSTRY:**

The success of cultural tourism has been further stimulated by the fact that the Malaysian government has embraced tourism (in all its forms) because of its economic potential. They've begun assorted campaigns to strengthen and promote their tourist industry, and have seen a resulting rise in visitors to Malaysia. Although Borneo has embraced many different forms of tourism – notably ecotourism – cultural tourism and cultural sites have carved out a significant, if smaller, niche in the tourist landscape.

The Malaysian government has chosen to base much of its development strategy around tourism because of its opportunities for “income generation, employment opportunity and foreign exchange earnings” (Bhuiyan 2013; 11). In 2004 the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism was renamed the “Ministry of Tourism” to demonstrate their dedication to the industry (Bhuiyan 2013; 12). Policy also reflects that shift. The “Ninth Malaysia Plan”, adopted for the 2006-2010 period, focused on enhancing Malaysia as an international tourist destination, promoting domestic tourism and developing a more extensive and more sustainable tourism infrastructure (Bhuiyan 2013; 12). The “Tenth Malaysia Plan” is intended to continue developing tourism throughout the 2011-2015 period. This plan focuses on attracting international visitors by emphasizing the proper management of tourist destinations and creating and distributing promotional materials, to meet Malaysia's goal of becoming one of the “top ten countries of the world in terms of global tourism receipts” (Bhuiyan 2013; 12).

In many respects, this campaign has been successful. In 2011 Malaysia welcomed approximately 24.7 million tourists, up from the 17.4 million visitors in 2006 when the Ninth Malaysia Plan was first implemented (Bhuiyan 2013;13). Although many of these visitors come to see the “tribal peoples... whose culture is unique to Borneo and [who] have always held a special fascination for outsiders” Borneo’s high levels of biodiversity mean that its dominant form of alternative tourism is ecotourism (Pringle 1970; 5).<sup>2</sup> One of the five major themes for the development of contemporary Malaysia’s tourism industry (articulated in the “Tourism in Economic Transformation Program” (ETP)) is “Nature Adventure,” a theme designed to attract “international attention to Malaysia’s excellent biodiversity, support responsible tourism and promote sustainable management of [the] country’s natural areas” (Bhuiyan 2013;15).

With this heavy focus on ecotourism, visits to cultural villages, longhouses, museums and other cultural sites often become a peripheral part of the tourist experience. One woman, “Kelly”<sup>3</sup> told me that she had chosen Borneo as her destination because she “wanted to see orangutans, basically.”<sup>4</sup> However, she also told me that even though it wasn’t why she chose to come to Borneo, she had gone to visit the Sarawak Cultural Village because “it’s one of the

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<sup>2</sup> Alternative tourism is a fairly broad category that is generally divided into three smaller subcategories: adventure tourism, cultural tourism and ecotourism. Adventure tourism is comprised of activities that require physical strength and endurance, and that involve a degree of controlled risk taking, such as deep-sea diving, bicycling and whitewater rafting (Crump 2000:6). Cultural tourism has developed quite a bit in recent years. The classic model of this brand of tourism is passive consumption such as visiting museums and historic sites but more recently the term “cultural tourism” has come to refer to the active “concentration of the product on traditional village life and natural attractions” (Richards 2007:9). Typically, cultural tours include visits to indigenous villages<sup>2</sup> or their replicas, the consumption of traditional foods, and the viewing of cultural events such as ritual dance, consumption of traditional foods and other, similar, activities. Ecotourism - formally defined by The International Ecotourism Society as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” - has traditionally been hailed as a sort of silver bullet for development (Crump 2000:6) (Rai 2012:8). Ecotours are usually characterized by nature-based activities such as wildlife viewing or trekking and, ideally, include an educational component. It is the least well-defined of any of the three forms of alternative tourism, although it theoretically includes an educational component and low impact forms of travel (Crump 2000:4).

<sup>3</sup> All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identity and opinions of research subjects.

<sup>4</sup> Borneo is one of only two places in the world where orangutans can be found in the wild and although most tourists see them in zoos, sanctuaries or rehabilitation centers, the tourism board aggressively promotes this fact.

things to do in Kuching”. The opportunity to visit a cultural village didn’t feature prominently in her decision to come to Borneo, but she really enjoyed her time there. When I asked her if she’d liked it she responded by saying “yeah, it was *really* good... It was cool the different things... we were just looking round at the buildings”.

Even if they’re not the main draw, these sites are a prominent attraction for many tourists once they arrive. In fact, there’s been such a proliferation of cultural villages around Kota Kinabalu that the Sabah board of Tourism has begun to close some of the older ones as newer, better curated villages crop up to take their place. Furthermore, even if cultural villages are a secondary attraction for most tourists, many still know to expect them and look forward to their experiences there. A few people in my hostel, knowing that I was studying cultural villages, approached me to ask what “the best” one to go to was, and one man who had gone to a village he found disappointing quizzed me about where else he could go to “try the blowpipe,” a cultural activity he hoped to try on his trip.

That interest in particular cultural sites and activities is reflective of the colonial history in Borneo and the impacts of lingering colonial narratives on the tourist industry. The economic benefits of tourist capital have sparked the Malaysian government’s support for the industry, and set a precedent for accommodating those consumers (tourists) in order to continue accumulating foreign capital. The result is increased political support for indigenous culture, accompanied by a proliferation of tourist sites that conform to the colonial narrative, and perpetuate and celebrate a stereotypical model of indigeneity.

#### **AUTHENTICITY AND THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE:**

Throughout my time in Borneo, it became increasingly clear to me that the cultural experiences that most tourists want are those that they deem authentic. However, many of their expectations for authenticity are influenced by the lingering presence of the colonial narrative. The most popular – and therefore most prevalent – cultural activities are typically visits to longhouses, shows and performances featuring dances and traditional costuming, and the sorts of participatory activities where visitors can have their faces painted or try their hand at a blowpipe.

The consumer desire for these experiences means that not only have they proliferated, but that they all conform to a sort of “rustic” aesthetic. Many cultural sites are curated to accommodate tourist expectations even though that often means that they present historical depictions of the Dayak without regard to contemporary indigeneity. This staging is most often evident in the building materials used at cultural tourist sites, and the “traditional” activities and ceremonies performed for tourists. Interestingly, the staged sites that conform most comprehensively to that aesthetic are generally better-liked by tourists and therefore more profitable for their owners and employees than a less-staged, contemporary showcase would be. That profit leads to a proliferation of similarly curated sites.

Nearly all of the tourist longhouses I visited were made from completely different materials than the dwellings the people of the village actually live in. During my stay at a Rungus Longhouse (facilitated by the largest tour operator in Borneo), my fieldnotes describe the longhouse as “made in typical tourist-pleasing fashion. Most of the materials were bamboo or other vegetative thatch. Even for things that aren’t made from bamboo (major supports, joints etc.) it was exclusively wood materials.” This is also the case at the most successful cultural villages. The most popular villages in both Sarawak and Sabah feature houses built with bamboo-type materials and thatched roofs. By contrast, at the KDCA cultural village in Sabah,

houses had clearly visible concrete foundations and metal brackets, and featured fake stone and plastic-looking varnished wood. Although this cultural village has existed for a long time, it lately hasn't been very successful and the government is in the process of shutting it down.

These observations dovetail with some of the analysis from Robert L. Winzeler's 2011 book *The Peoples of Southeast Asia Today: Ethnography, Ethnology and Change in a Complex Region* which outlines the ways in which different longhouses' tourist numbers swelled or suffered according to the aesthetic they presented. Winzeler provides a brief overview of tour agencies' curation of tourist longhouses in Sarawak, supporting my observations that "built-for-tourist buildings are constructed in customary styles with hardwood posts, wood and bamboo framing and thatch roofs" and that during their visits tourists want to see "people engaged in ordinary daily activities, preferably traditional ones like women pounding rice in mortars" (Winzeler 2011; 231). Winzeler also quotes a letter from a tourist agent to the headman of an Iban tourist longhouse outlining nine points to "make [longhouse tourism] even better for the benefit of all" (Winzeler 2011; 231). His suggestions include requirements such as "warrior dancers must be with shield" and "posters and TV aerials are not to be displayed openly at the *ruai* [inside veranda]" (Winzeler 2011; 231).

In my visits to various longhouses, this preferred "rustic" aesthetic contrasted sharply with the look of the homes that surrounded the staged tourist lodge. In a Rungus village in Sabah, the people there no longer lived in a longhouse, but in single-family homes constructed from modern materials like concrete, glass and metal that didn't remotely resemble the "traditional", all wood, longhouse we stayed in. Even in other villages that have maintained traditional longhouse residence, the building materials have been modernized so that their longhouses don't closely resemble the lodges where tourists stay. The traditional longhouse at

Batu Bungan, an Iban village located just outside of Mulu National Park, was destroyed by fire a few years ago. The replacement that they have been building is made from concrete, with glass windows, and is plumbed and wired for electricity (although they don't have a power source), contrasting sharply with tourist longhouses that feature natural wood building materials and often lack plumbing or electricity.

In some cases, cultural experiences are further staged by the activities that are incorporated in a stay at or visit to a longhouse. On my tour to the Rungus longhouse, part of the tour package was a "cultural show" that showcased local tradition and culture. That said, it was clearly performed because we were there, and tailored to our perceived expectations. It was a series of dances performed by four traditionally dressed people (one man and three women). We had actually seen the guy get dressed – he had changed into his costume in the corner by shrugging it over his basketball shorts and tying the sash. They did three dances, and before each one the guide explained what it was traditionally used for. Each dance was a variation on 'this is a welcome dance' or 'this is used to welcome visiting dignitaries' and to an inexperienced eye they all looked remarkably similar.

It was evident to me that this was staged for several reasons. Firstly, although the longhouse was outfitted to hold 15-20 people, we were the only two staying there that night. Our guide told us that because there were so few visitors he would have to check if the performers were still willing to put on the cultural show. That simple economic consideration in and of itself demonstrates how little meaning this performance held for the Rungus people. The tourist shows are much more a matter of numbers than heritage. Secondly, we had seen the male dancer dress quickly, with no obvious emotional attachment to or reverence for the clothes that he was putting on. Rather, he treated the costuming and subsequent dance with cold detachment. Thirdly, apart

from the group of men who played the gongs, there was no one present to watch the performance except us. Clearly this particular show held no significance for the people of the village (even if the dance itself did). One of the men I chatted with after the show said that although they “like doing the dances,” they don’t typically do it unless tourists are there. Finally, as my companion pointed out, the dancers didn’t really look like they wanted to be there. Although their straight faces could certainly have been part of the tradition, there was one point in the dance when we were asked to stand and participate and even throughout that, the dancers made limited eye contact with us, and were hesitant to engage. It felt to both me and my friend that our inclusion was just the next step in a rote script, which reduced the sense of authenticity. Even if the dance, costumes, etc. were “real”, the lack of clear emotional attachment was unnerving.

This performance clearly didn’t meet my companion’s expectations for our experience, and she was evidently disappointed:

“The dance that we saw, the cultural dance, it did make me quite uncomfortable. I didn’t really know how to react to it, so I just sat there smiling even though the dancers were not smiling and were not looking like they really wanted to be there... That was very awkward. It was an awkward dynamic. And then they just kind of packed up and left. We weren’t able to speak to them or get to know them at all.”

Although the longhouse’s physical aesthetic met her expectations, she was put off by the signals of curation and inauthenticity that were especially evident during the performance. It’s important to note that that perception of inauthenticity has an economic ramification. Her uneasiness impacted her views on the entire tour, which she said fell short of her expectations, saying that if she returned to Borneo she would travel “more independent[ly] and not through a tour company”. By not meeting her expectations fully, the tour company has incurred a financial penalty – they won’t get her return business, or a recommendation to any of her friends. It’s evident from moments like this why tour agents prioritize meeting tourists’ expectations over

offering a truly “authentic” peak into quotidian indigenous life. That economic incentive to stage tourist sites according to visitors’ expectations is evident at cultural villages as well.

When I interviewed Kelly she had been to two cultural villages over her ten days in Malaysia – the Sarawak Cultural Village just outside of Kuching, and the KDCA cultural village in Kota Kinabalu. I accompanied her to KDCA and went to the Sarawak Cultural Village alone, but my fieldnotes from both highlight their extensive differences. The Sarawak Cultural Village is a ring of dwellings built in the style of several different indigenous groups, surrounding a lake. The area it’s in is forested and remote, about a 45 minute drive from Kuching and, although it’s only a few minutes’ walk from several large resorts, no other buildings can be seen from the property. Each house is built from the same sorts of rustic materials as the touristic longhouse I have previously described. Many were made from bamboo and thatching or, at the Orang Ulu longhouse, balanced on ornately carved and decorated posts. Even the homes that were designed to look more “modern” – the Malay townhouse and the Chinese farmhouse - were built in a rustic wood-based style, their intended modernity mostly indicated by the furnishings.

Each dwelling at the Sarawak Cultural Village is staffed by an employee performing a demonstration. Usually this person is dressed in traditional-looking clothes, and has something they are selling. The woman at the Melanau tall house, for example, was making Segu biscuits. She quickly demonstrated the process and then offered to sell a package of the product for a couple of ringgit. At the Biddayuh longhouse, there’s a variety of beaded jewelry available for purchase, and the traditionally-dressed sellers are sitting on the floor beading more. The success of these enterprises roughly correlates with the uniqueness of the product offered and, therefore, its perceived authenticity. If it seems to be uniquely Bornean – or, even better, unique to a

particular indigenous group – it is more marketable. The segu biscuits and Sarawak pepper, therefore, are big sellers. The temporary tattoos and neon-colored jewelry are not.

The KDCA cultural village is fundamentally different. For one thing, it's closed, but the aesthetic of its buildings is also quite different from that of the other cultural villages.<sup>5</sup> Although the layout of the village is based on the same general premise as other cultural villages I'd visited (each house represents a different indigenous group) the buildings looked very uniform. They seemed dated and looked like bad replicas of American hunting lodges. In contrast to the tourist sites that feature materials like bamboo and thatching, these had concrete foundations and walls made of fake stone or painted logs. Further contributing to the village's lack of charm was the fact that it was located "between a busy highway, a parking lot and another, smaller side road"; it didn't have any of the vegetation or "lost world" atmosphere I had come to expect from cultural villages.

When I asked Kelly about her experiences at both cultural villages, she indicated that she had also picked up on the difference in authenticity, saying that at the Sarawak Cultural Village:

"It's kind of cool, walking around to all the different buildings. The steps to some of them are really scary, it's like sticks going up and just bits cut in... [The Sarawak Cultural Village] is kind of cool because it seems to have a lot more different styles of buildings, whereas the one we went to that was closed [KDCA] seemed all modern and shiny."<sup>6</sup>

While Kelly's assessment of the inauthenticity at the KDCA cultural village was "modern and shiny" and mine was "dated," we picked up on the same contrasts between the Sarawak

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<sup>5</sup> Tourism in Malaysia is down in summer 2015 (largely due to the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight 370) and the Sabah Board of Tourism decided that one of the best ways for them to cut costs was to close KDCA cultural village until the industry picked back up.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly's mention of "sticks going up and just bits cut in" is referring to the traditional "stairs" leading into a longhouse. Rather than using a Western staircase or ladder, many Bornean longhouses are entered via a log that stretches between the elevated longhouse platform and the ground with notches cut into it to provide a flat place for feet to rest on. While some cultural villages offered both these entrances ("the adventurous way") and traditional Western stairs that led through a back door, the buildings in the Sarawak Cultural Village that feature the log entrances don't have an alternative.

Cultural Village and KDCA. The Sarawak Cultural Village accommodates the colonial narrative. It presents a remote vibe – it’s a fairly significant drive away from Kuching in a quiet, forested area. The houses are made from natural-seeming materials like bamboo, thatch and carved wood and the people working there are dressed in traditional clothes, and engaging in the sorts of rustic, hands-on activities that tourists expect (cooking, grinding rice, beading jewelry etc.)

At the KDCA cultural village, there are none of these amenities. Although admittedly, it was closed when we visited – and therefore we didn’t have any performers to guide us, or do a final dance – the concrete, metal and plastic parts of the buildings are obvious and it’s located about a half an hour bus ride from the city, where it abuts a busy highway. It has none of the lost world charm of the Sarawak Cultural Village or Mari Mari Cultural Village.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, almost no one working at a cultural village attempted to portray it as an accurate representation of contemporary indigenous life. While they were often not totally candid about what contemporary indigenous life is actually like, guides were generally quick to assert that the bamboo longhouses or other residences were “what life was like in the olden days” or that they were “just for the tourists.” Nevertheless, cultural villages that present a more historical and rustic image tend to be more successful and better received by their intended audiences. The economic benefits of giving tourists what they want to see has led to a proliferation of cultural sites that overwhelmingly emphasize the past, without creating comparable opportunities for tourists to access the experience of contemporary indigeneity. It is obvious that a museum showing Dayaks doing the sorts of everyday activities that I observed –

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<sup>7</sup> Mari Mari is located in Sabah, about a thirty-minute drive outside of Kota Kinabalu (traffic depending). Much like the Sarawak Cultural Village it features a variety of different buildings and residences all meant to represent a different indigenous group. Like the Sarawak Cultural Village, Mari Mari has activities visitors can try (touching eels, trying rice liquor etc.) and culminates with a cultural show. Unlike SCV, visitors to Mari Mari go on scheduled, guided tours in moderately sized groups. That allows them to be “ambushed” by a group of headhunters as part of the approximately one-hour visit. The tour culminates with a buffet-style meal.

riding motorcycles, living in western-style homes and working as police officers – wouldn't feel as unique, or be as popular, as a visit to a longhouse or cultural village. Therefore, the casual visitor to Malaysian Borneo gets a picture of indigenous culture as something much more rustic and undeveloped than contemporary Dayak life may truly be.

### **ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL TOURISM ON BORNEO'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES:**

Malaysia's cultural tourism industry is widely variegated, with both positive and negative attributes. One of its most notable downsides is its potential to encourage cultural commodification by overwhelming the tourist experience with an outdated view of Dayak culture that caters to tourists' expectations. Despite the significance of that risk, cultural tourism can also have a notable positive impact on indigenous cultures and lifestyles. One of the most significant benefits is that cultural tourism offers members of indigenous groups earning opportunities that pivot on and celebrate their cultures and identities. It also provides tools for members of indigenous communities to participate in more international settings through language learning opportunities. Furthermore, the direct economic benefits of cultural tourism provide motivation for the relearning and retention of indigenous culture and tradition. In these ways, cultural tourism helps indigenous groups preserve their history and tradition while also providing a platform for them to maintain their relevancy in the contemporary, globalized world.

#### Retention and Relearning of Culture

One of the most significant benefits of cultural tourism is the economic incentive it provides to preserve and highlight indigenous culture. Tourist dollars are a significant source of income for many communities that participate in the industry; at one longhouse on the Jinginn river, they now account for one fourth of the village's annual income. For communities like

these, cultural tourism ranges from a way to encourage outward-focused teenagers to participate in tradition, to a vehicle for middle-aged Dayaks to learn (or, in some cases, relearn) specific cultural attributes such as dances in order to participate in cultural tourism. One guide told me that his wife, ethnically Bidayuh, had been retaught her cultural dances in school as an initiative to combat cultural loss among younger generations.

“In [her] longhouse the girls don’t actually dance... the young ladies in the longhouse don’t [know how to] dance anymore, only the older ladies do. So [younger people] have to relearn their culture and in this case it’s perceived to be good... relearning our culture, but in this case for the sake of tourism.”

Those attempts to intentionally expose young people to traditional culture were also visible during a staged cultural performance at a Rungus longhouse built to house tourists for one-night stays. The first “performance” we saw was a traditional game where the dancer steps quickly through several logs that are being rapidly banged together and then moved apart. If the dancer mistimes a step, his or her feet are smashed. This game was demonstrated for us by a group of younger people ranging from eight or nine up to about sixteen. Although they were all dressed in western clothes (except for one young woman who would later participate in the main part of the performance) they were also all clearly comfortable with the dance steps. The teenage boy who did most of the dancing was so comfortable with it that he was able to jump through the sticks impossibly fast without erring. Our guide told me that they perform the cultural show a few times a week, giving the kids who participate plenty of practice.

The participants in the main performance – a series of dances – were also younger. The oldest dancer was probably in her early thirties and none of the older women who had prepared meals for us were anywhere to be seen (although the group of men who sat to the side and played the gongs ranged from early twenties to maybe fifty or sixty). The musician I spoke with after

the show told me that the Rungus people “like doing the show for the tourists” since it gives them an opportunity to practice the dances. It was evident that this community’s engagement with the tourist industry creates an economic (and globalized, since many of the tourists who are interested in viewing cultural shows come from fully developed nations like China, Australia and Germany) incentive for younger dancers to learn the traditional dances, facilitating generational transmission and retention of culture.

### Continued Education and Opportunity

Cultural tourism also provides benefits to indigenous communities by providing employment that teaches global skills. Josiah, a guide at Mulu National Park, explained to me that his English language skills are the result of his job in the park, saying “I start learning English to work in the park. And I am very proud that I am able to speak to you.” He later told me that he started work at Mulu as a part time guide until, in 2002, his English was deemed good enough for him to be promoted to a full time position. Josiah is Penan and lives in a small village which borders the park. As much as possible, Mulu tries to employ people from that village in the park’s restaurant, as guides or in other capacities – particularly since the park offers a tour to see the village. By hiring Josiah, Mulu has not only given him the “good job” and the opportunity to learn English in the park, but has also allowed him to access other, more cosmopolitan, work.

In addition to English, Josiah speaks Malay, Penan and Iban and so he often travels to do translation work at conferences during his time off from guiding. Thanks to the need for English-speaking tour guides at Mulu, Josiah was able to dramatically increase his social and cultural capital, further his individual opportunities for earning, and position himself as an advocate for

his community (he's on the committee that makes park decisions that may also affect his village, which is located on the park border). Although a visit to Mulu can encompass many forms of tourism, and usually focuses on ecotourism rather than cultural tourism, this example still demonstrates how alternative tourism can benefit individual members of the indigenous communities that participate in it.

### Cultural Commodification

Despite the work that cultural tourism does to facilitate the retention of indigenous culture, encourage youth enthusiasm and participation in heritage, and provide global opportunities for individual members of indigenous groups, it can also contribute to the disintegration and commodification of the indigenous culture it seeks to highlight. Because most tourist enterprises seek to maximize their earnings, they tend to conform to tourists' expectations (which have often been influenced and/or formed by a whirlwind of colonial influences) thus reinforcing pervasive – if seemingly harmless - indigenous stereotypes.

The Mari Mari Cultural Village, for example, has fake heads scattered throughout its displays as a sort of homage to Borneo's famous headhunting culture. Although the guide was careful to assert both that the heads are fake and that headhunting is a relic of the distant past, the realistic-looking skulls feature prominently in multiple displays at the village. These gestures to accommodate tourists' expectations (albeit tempered with the guides' realistic take on contemporary indigeneity) have made Mari Mari one of the most popular cultural villages in Sabah. The woman working at my hostel recommended it enthusiastically, and when I got there I found crowds of visitors on a scale I hadn't seen at any other cultural village.

Furthermore, because of the demand for cultural shows, many cultural tourist sites now offer a curated image of indigenous culture without respect to actually preserving or respecting the indigenous culture that inspired their representations. I was told in an off-the-record conversation that the Sarawak Cultural Village - which divides its dances by ethnicity so that guests see eight dances, each inspired by a different Dayak group to give visitors a full survey of indigenous culture – hires its performers without regard to their ethnicity, and teaches them the dance once they're hired. By hiring without regard to ethnicity they devalue the importance of each dance to its ethnic group of origin, and create a *mélange* of homogenized indigenous culture that they present to tourists as authentic and unique.

That amalgamation of different indigeneities is evident outside the dances and cultural shows as well. Even though the guides are explicit that the demonstrations at Mari Mari are “the way life was in the olden days” every visitor to the cultural village leaves with an impression of indigeneity that involves wearing loincloths and headdresses, living in bamboo longhouses decorated with skulls, and performing elaborate dances. Many of those elements are indeed central to indigenous cultural history in Borneo, but they also fail to fully represent indigenous lifestyles to visitors who likely won't have the opportunity to experience contemporary indigenous life. Although a survey of modern Bidayuh or Iban life would certainly seem modernized, technological, and global -- therefore appearing less unique, mysterious and “special” -- it would also balance the image of indigeneity that many tourists experience only through visits to cultural villages and longhouses. By conforming mainly to touristic expectations, many of these sites perpetuate the dominance of an outdated narrative of indigeneity and, whether intentionally or not, place more importance on those aspects of indigeneity favored by tourists.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:**

The variety of impacts that cultural tourism has on indigenous cultural preservation and individual Dayaks speaks to just how complex the relationships are between members of indigenous groups and the tourist sites that portray them.

Participation in the tourist industry provides individuals with good jobs, and opportunities for continued education. The significant economic benefits of tourism encourage interest in indigenous culture among younger generations of Dayaks (even, in some cases, relearning) and draw broader support from the Malaysian government. However, those economic benefits mean that tourist sites are nearly always tailored to accommodate the expectations of the western tourist. Those expectations are overwhelmingly the result of lingering colonial narratives in the western consciousness, and therefore disproportionately highlight “exotic” and “savage” aspects of indigenous culture like headhunting and longhouse life. Those varied – and to some degree, opposing – impacts of cultural tourism make it difficult to judge; suffice it to say that tourism can do a lot of harm, but also be a wonderful benefit for a place and its people. Although some impacts of cultural tourism in Borneo are already evident, its ultimate outcome remains to be seen.

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