

POTENTIAL OF IBAN CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE OF SONG DISTRICT SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The captivating allure of Sarawak lies in its ethnic diversity, rich cultural heritage, and abundant natural resources, which serve as key assets for the development of sustainable community-based tourism (CBT) ventures in rural communities. However, realising this potential requires strong and continuous support from local stakeholders. Hence, this study explores the potential for sustainable CBT in Sarawak's Song district, focusing on the Iban community. A total of 68 respondents participated in a questionnaire survey conducted between April and July 2022. From the descriptive data analysis, the study found a strong connection between the Iban people and their traditions. This connection, along with the community's possession of traditional knowledge, has resulted in active participation in cultural events and activities at the village level. This study concluded with recommendations for enhancing the conservation of traditional culture and natural resources, and active participation in the planning and management of successful and sustainable CBT for rural development.

Key words: *community-based tourism, rural resource management, participatory, Iban community, sustainable rural development*

INTRODUCTION

Among the states in Malaysia, Sarawak stands out for its exceptional and welcoming socio-cultural fabric, owing to its status as home to the largest number of ethnicities in the country. According to Nelson [15], there are 38 sub-ethnic groups of native people with a total population of about 1,809,856 in Sarawak, boasting the Borneo state as a rich tapestry of cultural expressions. This incredible diversity of cultural and environmental resources positions Sarawak as a prime destination for tourism development, offering tremendous potential for captivating experiences and encounters. The presence of ethnic diversity not only enriches the cultural varieties but also presents challenges in preserving cultural heritage, particularly in the face of influences from social media, the internet, and modern entertainment from outside. In this light, protecting the multi-ethnic culture of Sarawak requires a united effort from all stakeholders. As the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, the Iban community faces a significant challenge

in preserving their rich cultural heritage, particularly among the younger generation and those who have migrated away from their original settlements. Most of the young people have migrated to the city to pursue their careers, resulting in a lack of time and interest in learning and perpetuating their ancestral traditions [5][10]. The influence of foreign cultures has further contributed to the dilution of authentic Iban cultural practices. Such dissipation necessitates an urgent need to harness and promote the remaining practices of the Iban culture as a valuable asset that can stimulate socio-cultural tourism. This article explores the significant socio-cultural elements that serve as invaluable assets within the Iban community, focusing on community leadership and participation.

Literature review

Sustainable Cultural Tourism

Sustainable tourism development serves as a means to safeguard and protect the culture and environment of ethnic communities residing in specific regions. According to Kamarudin [9], the notion of sustainable tourism is a pillar of

the effort to promote sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism is also an ongoing process that necessitates continual monitoring, proactive measures, and collective action when needed. It plays a pivotal role in maintaining tourist satisfaction levels and ensuring meaningful experiences that raise awareness about sustainability issues and promote sustainable tourism practices [1][2]. Sustainable tourism practices contribute to the long-term well-being of local communities by promoting responsible tourism development that respects the integrity of the environment and nurtures social and economic benefits [7][17].

Supported by natural resources and agriculture-related activities (Fig. 1), cultural and heritage tourism serves as a significant

attraction to visitors. The allure lies in the opportunity to delve deeper into local cultures and heritage, either through observation or first-hand experiences [5][19][23]. Sarawak is unquestionably one of the Malaysian states blessed with an abundance of cultural assets that are still flourishing and capturing the interest of both local and foreign visitors. Sustainable tourism practices are vital in preserving and showcasing the cultural and heritage assets of the Iban community of Sarawak. By integrating sustainability principles into tourism activities, the region can ensure the conservation and appreciation of its diverse cultural products. This approach not only enriches the visitor experience but also fosters a greater understanding and respect for local traditions and customs.

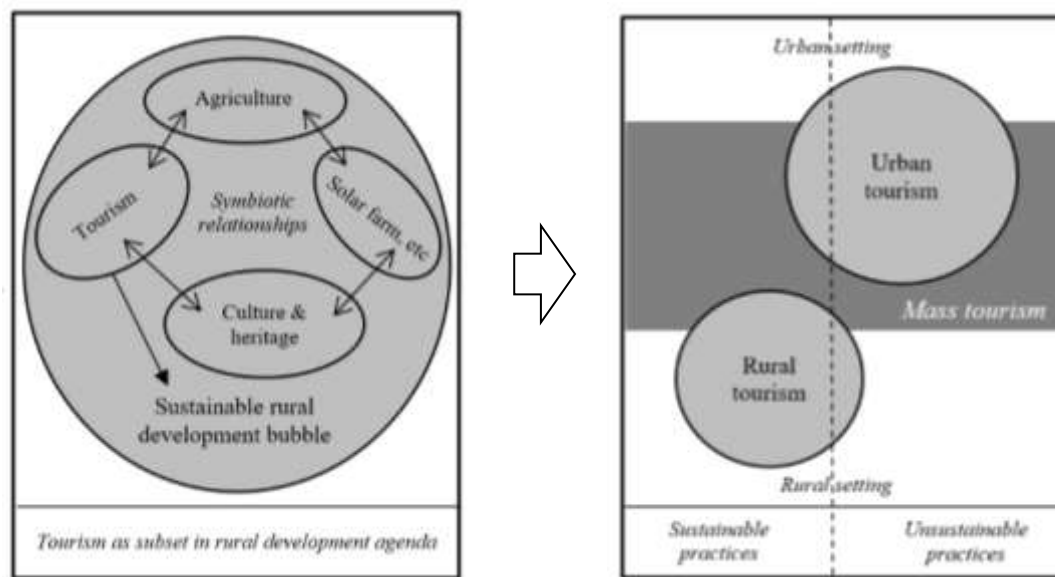


Fig. 1. Rural and cultural tourism paradigm shifting from an individual bubble into a more integrative and inclusive component of sustainable rural development bubble. Source: [9, 18].

The Iban Heritage and Culture

Socio-cultural significance holds immense importance for all ethnic groups in Sarawak, particularly the Iban people. According to the founder of the Iban Customs Club (KAID) Mr. Nimpai, unity and understanding are a prerequisite for the Iban community to thrive alongside other ethnicities in Sarawak [20]. Renowned for their distinct culture and customs, the Iban community's daily lives are deeply intertwined with practices inherited from their ancestors since time immemorial.

These enduring cultural traditions have been passed down through generations, guided by the teachings entrusted by their forebears [3]. The Iban language, as the literature indicates, remains popular with almost two-thirds of Sarawak's population (approximately 800,000 individuals in 2013) relying on the Iban language for daily communication [13]. Other than language, the Iban culture also signifies the traditional attire that people mostly wear on special days such as *Gawai* Day and wedding ceremonies [20, 21].

The *Gawai* celebration, one of the official festival days in Sarawak, is a day to celebrate the new year marked by the end of the rice harvesting season and the beginning of the new rice planting season [6]. It is a festive season of traditional and social festivals. The Iban people are also proud of their traditional dance popularly known as “Ngajat” [22]. The dance is the identity of the Iban community and previously being performed to welcome Iban warriors who returned from war. They are celebrated with a *Gawai* celebration called *Gawai Kenyalang*. In terms of the dance and those who perform the dance, it depends on the purpose of the dance. The types of *Ngajat* dance include *Ngajat Berbunoh*, *Ngajat Lesong*, *Ngajat Induk*, *Ngajat Ngalu Temuai*, *Ngajat Kuta*, and *Ngajat Pua Kumbu*.

The traditional foods and cuisine of the Iban community also reflect their identity. Among the popular traditional Iban foods loved by the people of Sarawak are *Ayam Pansuh*, *Pekasam Ensabi*, and *Umai* [13]. These popular cuisines are inherited from generation to generation, served daily and customarily with the *Tuak* drink (alcohol) during festivals such as the *Gawai* celebration [6]. Before embracing Christianity, many Iban people practised traditional beliefs and held various rituals and religious ceremonies. This belief originates from Raja Durong [18] so it gave birth to belief in their *petera* (God), supernatural powers, spirits of the living and the dead, and natural phenomena, among others. All the beliefs, taboos, and customs and the relationship with nature as well as respect for the spirits of those who have died have maintained the relevance of the practice of tilting in the life of the Iban community as in conservation work.

Leadership and Participation in Local Development

According to Kamarudin [9], the presence of community leadership within social institutions holds immense significance in shaping and influencing the level of participation in local development. This principle is equally applicable to the Iban community, who reside in longhouses and possess their distinctive leadership system [11][12]. Leadership within the Iban community serves to foster unity and ensure

the success of transformative initiatives [4]. At the traditional level of leadership, the *Tuai Rumah* holds the highest position within the organisational structure of an Iban longhouse in Sarawak. The term *tuai* signifies wisdom and experience, highlighting the social status, personality, and knowledge of an individual. The responsibility of the *Tuai Rumah* encompasses leading, protecting, controlling, and nurturing the well-being and harmony of the residents and the longhouse as a whole [8]. To encourage wider support and participation of community members in local development projects (or cultural tourism projects in this case), the institution of *Tuai Rumah* leadership needs to be supported by a workable organisation [9]. Together with their committee, the process of shaping community development can be carried out more effectively by identifying the socio-cultural potential within the community, particularly in terms of tourism prospects. Recognising and leveraging these potentials can significantly contribute to the holistic development of the community [12][14]. In summary, the literature confirms the vital role of socio-cultural components within the Iban community, shedding light on elements such as leadership and active participation that contribute to the preservation and promotion of their rich heritage for tourism activities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area, Sampling Method and Analysis of Data

Based on the 2010 census, the population of Kapit Division is 112,762, with Song district accounting for 20,595 residents (Map 1) [13]. In Song, the majority (80%) of the population is of Iban ethnicity while the remaining are the Orang Ulu, Chinese, Malay, Melanau, and Bidayuh. The selection of Song as the study area is attributed to its significant Iban population, particularly in the interior regions where traditional customs and practices are still observed in many of the long houses. The Iban community in Song, Sarawak, was selected as the study sample using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was employed due to the specific knowledge and experience

possessed by the chosen respondents pertaining to the scope of the research [16].



Map 1. Location of Song District in Sarawak, Malaysia. Source: [13].

Methodology

In the context of this study, purposive sampling refers to the selection of a subgroup of the population who possesses certain characteristics that align with the research objectives. The cooperation and support received from all relevant parties in providing the necessary information for the study had been commendable and has facilitated the research process and enhanced the quality of the data obtained. This study employed descriptive statistical analysis using Microsoft Excel to analyse the data and obtain percentage values, mean, median, and related statistics.

Table 1. The list of components for assessment of Iban CBT potential in Song District

Components of assessment	Range of mean score
1. Socio-cultural practices	1-2.0 = Not practice 2.1-3.0 = Only sometimes 3.1-4.0 = Practised most of the time 4.1-5.0 = Practised all the time
2. Iban socio-cultural potential for community-based tourism (CBT)	1-2.0 = No potential 2.1-3.0 = Minimal potential 3.1-4.0 = Good potential 4.1-5.0 = Highly potential
3. Iban community participation in socio-cultural activities	1-2.0 = Not involved 2.1-3.0 = Minimal involvement 3.1-4.0 = Involved most of the time 4.1-5.0 = Involved all the time
4. Future development of CBT requires strategies and participation	1-2.0 = Highly disagree 2.1-3.0 = Disagree 3.1-4.0 = Agree 4.1-5.0 = Total agreement

Source: [13].

The mean or average was calculated by summing the scores in the score distribution and dividing it by the total number of scores. Descriptive statistical analysis methods, including mean scores, were used to measure the socio-cultural practices, assess the socio-cultural potential in cultural tourism, and evaluate the level of involvement of the Iban community in Song in promoting socio-cultural activities.

Table 1 enlists the components of the assessment and the range of mean score values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profile of Respondents

The findings and analysis of the data regarding the background of the Iban community in Song are presented in Table 2. In terms of gender, the majority of respondents who participated in the questionnaire were women. The age group that showed the highest participation in answering the questionnaire was between 24 and 33 years old.

Table 2. Profile of respondents (n=68)

Question	Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	27	40.0
	Female	41	60.0
	Total	68	100.0
Age category	13-23 years old	10	15.0
	24-33	26	38.0
	34-43	16	24.0
	44-53	3	4.0
	>53	13	19.0
	Total	68	100.0
Year of business operation	1-5 years	3	4.0
	6-10	1	2.0
	>10	64	94.0
	Total	68	100.0

Source: [13].

Regarding the length of residence, the majority of Iban Song residents who completed the questionnaire stated that they have been living in Song for more than 10 years.

Level of Socio-cultural Practices

Table 3 presents the findings of the survey conducted among the residents of Song regarding the socio-cultural practices that are still observed in the community. The findings indicate that the Iban Song community

believes that the practice of the Iban language (91.2%), traditional Iban food and drink (61.8%), *Gawai* Day Festival (88.2%), Iban *Ngajat* dance (63.2%), and *Miring* ceremony (66.2%) are still widely practised. In comparison, it is thought that traditional Iban attire (52.9%), Iban handicrafts (58.8%), and farming and hunting (61.8%) are practiced to a lower level. However, when considering the

overall mean score value, it can be concluded that the socio-cultural practices in Song, as a whole, receive a rating of 4.1–5.0, indicating a high level of adherence among the Iban Song population. The majority of the Iban community in the study area continue these practices as they are deeply rooted customs that have been passed down for several decades.

Table 3. Socio-cultural practices among respondents in relation to CBT (n=68)

Elements	Percentage (%)					Mean Score*	Rank
	Very Low Practice	Low Practice	Moderate Practice	High Practice	Very High Practice		
Iban socio-cultural practices							
1. Speaking in the Iban language	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.8	91.2	4.91	1
2. Traditional attire	0.0	0.0	0.0	52.9	47.1	4.47	5
3. Traditional food/cuisine	0.0	0.0	0.0	38.2	61.8	4.62	4
4. <i>Gawai</i> festival	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.8	88.2	4.88	2
5. <i>Ngajat</i> dance	0.0	0.0	0.0	36.8	63.2	4.63	3
6. <i>Miring</i> ritual/ceremony	0.0	0.0	1.5	66.2	32.4	4.31	8
7. Traditional craft	0.0	0.0	2.9	58.8	38.2	4.35	6
8. Hunting and farming	0.0	0.0	2.9	61.8	35.3	4.32	7
Socio-cultural potential for CBT							
9. Iban language	1.5	10.3	29.4	38.2	20.6	3.66	8
10. Traditional attire	0.0	0.0	0.0	29.4	70.6	4.71	3
11. Traditional food/cuisine	0.0	0.0	1.5	26.5	72.1	4.71	4
12. <i>Gawai</i> festival	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.3	89.7	4.90	1
13. <i>Ngajat</i> dance	0.0	1.5	0.0	22.1	76.5	4.74	2
14. <i>Miring</i> ritual/ceremony	0.0	1.5	17.6	38.2	42.6	4.22	6
15. Traditional craft	0.0	0.0	2.9	36.8	63.2	4.63	5
16. Hunting and farming	0.0	4.4	7.4	66.2	22.1	4.06	7
Socio-cultural activities engagement							
17. Speaking in the Iban language	0.0	0.0	1.5	19.1	79.4	4.78	1
18. Traditional attire	2.9	4.4	29.4	48.5	14.7	3.68	4
19. Traditional food/cuisine	1.5	1.5	26.5	42.6	27.9	3.94	3
20. <i>Gawai</i> festival	0.0	0.0	8.8	29.4	61.8	4.53	2
21. <i>Ngajat</i> dance	4.4	16.2	20.6	35.3	23.5	3.57	5
22. <i>Miring</i> ritual/ceremony	14.7	16.2	13.2	25.0	30.9	3.41	7
23. Traditional craft	10.3	10.3	35.3	30.9	13.2	3.26	8
24. Hunting and farming	10.3	7.4	25.0	36.8	20.6	3.50	6

Note: Mean score range of 1.0-2.0 denoted for not practice; 2.1-3.0 denoted for only sometimes; 3.1-4.0 (practiced most of the time); and 4.1-5.0 (practised all the time)

Source: [13].

Results of mean score value analysis of the socio-cultural potential of the Iban community for future tourism development (Table 3) indicate that the practices that exhibit the highest percentage at the “highly potential” level are traditional Iban clothing (70.6%), followed by traditional Iban food and drink (72.1%), *Gawai* festival (89.7%), the *Ngajat* dance (76.5%), *Miring* ceremony (42.6%), handicrafts (63.2%), and hunting and farming activities (66.2%). Furthermore, the Iban

language practice has the largest percentage at the "good potential" level (38.2%). With aside of the Iban language practice, which is rated at the “good potential” level with an average of 3.66, almost all socio-cultural practices of the Iban community have great potential in the development of cultural tourism, according to the overall mean score value achievement. This is due to the majority of residents perceiving the language to be unsuitable as a stand-alone product and might need to be supported by

other practices for future cultural tourism development in Song.

The Iban Song community actively participates in the practice of the Iban language (79.4%), *Gawai* festival (61.8%), and *Miring* ceremony (30.9%), as indicated by the highest percentage of respondents engaging in these practices. On the other hand, practices such as traditional Iban attire (48.5%), traditional food and cuisine (42.6%), *Ngajat* dance (35.3%), and hunting and farming activities (36.8%) have the highest percentage of respondents at the “involved most of the time” level. The practice of Iban handicrafts (35.3%) received a moderate level of response.

A mean score of 4.1 and higher indicates that most respondents are very engaged in *Gawai* Day celebrations and Iban language practice. This is because the Iban language is the primary language used in their daily lives, and *Gawai* Day is an annual celebration cherished by the Dayak community.

On top of that, practices such as traditional attire, traditional food, *Ngajat* dance, *Miring* ritual, handicrafts, and hunting and farming activities recorded a mean score ranging from 3.1 to 4.0, indicating that the respondents are moderately involved in these practices.

These activities can be carried out at any time, and the level of involvement may vary among individuals based on personal preferences and circumstances.

Based on the comprehensive assessment of the three main components of this study, namely socio-cultural practices, the potential of socio-

cultural practices for future tourism, and community participation in socio-cultural activities, the authors have reached the following conclusion:

-The findings indicate that in Song, Sarawak, the Iban community actively participates in various sociocultural customs. These customs are widely accepted and profoundly embedded in the community.

-The Iban community's seven out of eight sociocultural traditions have a lot of potential for Song, Sarawak's cultural tourism industry to grow.

These practices, including traditional attire, traditional Iban food and cuisine, *Gawai* festival, *Ngajat* dance, *Miring* ceremony, Iban handicrafts, and hunting and farming activities, hold significant prospects for attracting cultural tourists.

-Among the socio-cultural practices, the Iban language practice and the *Gawai* festival exhibit the highest levels of involvement and participation among the Iban community in Song, Sarawak.

These practices are deeply rooted in the community's daily lives and are considered integral to their cultural identity.

Strategies for Iban Cultural Heritage Tourism

From the data analysis, a few strategies for promoting Iban CBT were identified (Table 4). A significant portion of the respondents (57.4%) advocated for the creation of collaborative artistic and cultural endeavours within the Iban community.

Table 4. Proposed preliminary strategies for Iban cultural heritage tourism (n=68)

Preliminary Strategies	Percentage (%)					Mean Score*	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5		
1. Create a locally-led organization to organize, develop, and oversee CBT.	0.0	1.5	16.2	58.8	23.5	4.04	4
2. Boost public and governmental participation in the preservation of Iban culture and heritage.	0.0	0.0	4.4	54.4	41.2	4.37	3
3. Launch cooperative initiatives to foster Iban art, culture, and heritage.	0.0	0.0	4.4	38.2	57.4	4.53	1
4. Encourage community involvement in CBT (youth icon etc)	0.0	0.0	2.9	51.5	45.6	4.43	2

Note: *Mean score range: 1-2.0 = Highly disagree; 2.1-3.0 = Disagree; 3.1-4.0 = Agree; 4.1-5.0 = Total agreement
 Source: [13].

However, there was only moderate to general agreement on the following: the necessity of increasing local support and participation (51.5%), the establishment of locally-led

institutions at the local and district levels (58.8%), and the role of the government and society in promoting sustainability and art and heritage (54.4%).

Overall, the respondents strongly support these measures as a means to promote their existing socio-cultural practices to the wider community and enhance their potential as valuable assets in cultural tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

The study highlights the significance and potential of the socio-cultural practices of the Iban community in Song, Sarawak, and identifies the community's active involvement and support for cultural tourism development. The community shows strong support for the implementation of appropriate measures to promote and develop cultural tourism in the area. Their positive stance reflects a willingness to enhance cultural tourism initiatives and contribute to the preservation and promotion of their cultural heritage. Additionally, the article outlined a few preliminary suggestions meant to support the socio-cultural potential of the Song district's Iban population. These recommendations emphasize the value of protecting and presenting the Iban community's cultural assets and act as a guide for potential tourism development projects.

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