

Representation of Native Myths and Legends and Cultural Values in the Malaysian Tourism Promotional Brochures

Norhanim Abdul Razak and Abd Rahim Romle
School of Tourism, Hospitality and Environmental Management,
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Changlun, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Abstract: The primary aim of this study is to explore how native mythological tales have been portrayed in tourism marketing. As part of the assessment this research examines the values ingrained in the native myths and the parts of the traditional stories which have been selected for inclusion and commoditisation in tourism brochures. Content analysis of the representation of myths associated with Mount Kinabalu and the legendary warrior named Monsopiad was carried out. Findings show that Mount Kinabalu's myth has been included in the brochures published from 1969-2015 while the legend associated with Monsopiad has been represented in the brochures published from 2007-2015. Traditional worldviews and values linked to Kadazan Dusun have been projected in the tourism brochures. The analysis of the stories uncovered specific elements associated with Kadazan Dusun people such as the beliefs in the afterlife and presence of spirits, nature as the source of supernatural occurrences and the notion of bravery consisting of physical strength and spiritual power. It was reflected via the projection of two tales that the Kadazan Dusuns are intimately linked to nature, their ancestors and supernatural worlds. Lastly, the findings of this study contribute to understanding of the representation of tourism and mythology by demonstrating that in addition to cultural heritage sites, myths and legends have also been included in the promotion of natural sites and natural resources. Besides, the parts of the mythological tales which have been commoditised in the brochures are the ones that showcase the uniqueness of particular ethnic groups and places.

Key words: Myths, legends, representation, tourism marketing, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

According to scholars such as Perez-Aranda as well as Hassan and Isa (2014), mythological tales and attributes have been frequently included in the promotion of tourist destinations as it is believed that the utilisation of enticing tales can increase the desirability of destinations and add value to the tourist experience. In the context of Borneo, Gingging (2007) states that anthropologists and colonial officers living there during the British era were interested in the local traditions and customs linked to indigenous myths. However, it is important to note that myths and legends are not things of the past, as mystical beliefs and practices form part of the way of life for some Malaysians even in modern times. The practice of rituals and customs associated with myths and legends is still evident in Malay community life, particularly in wedding ceremonies, the performing arts and other life-cycle rites (Larsen, 1996; Hamzah, 2007).

Despite the significance of myths and legends in Malaysia only a limited numbers of studies have examined

mythological tales, especially in the context of tourism. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to explore the representation of native myths and legends in the Malaysian promotional material, focusing on an analysis of indigenous traditional tales. In the context of Malaysian tourism, the analysis of myths is important as contemporary promotion focuses on multi-ethnic and multi-cultural attributes (Yaapar, 2005) and one way to showcase ethnicity and cultural vibrancy is via mythology. Moreover, the growing importance of mythology in tourism promotion is clearly reflected recently as 'myths and folklore' have been chosen as the theme for the celebration of . During the celebration, many well-known myths and legends have been presented to visitors using the concept of street performance.

Literature review: Indigenous myths. A review of the available literature on indigenous myths reveals that many articles discuss a connection to rituals and festivals associated with paddy spirits. Based on studies of the mythological tales of various native groups, namely

Kadazan Dusun, Iban, Rungus and the Negrito population such as Semang, Jakun and Jahut, a number of key attributes can be identified (Shimomoto, 1979; Liang, 1985; Hussin, 2008). One of the key criteria of the native myths is the intimate relationship between native people and their natural environment and landscape. A second characteristic is that nature is the source of mystical and supernatural phenomena and some parts of natural resources are considered sacred. For instance, according to the Kadazan Dusun traditional belief, Mount Kinabalu is regarded as a sacred resting ground and a final destination for their souls (Liang, 1985). Another criterion of indigenous myths is that the human world is intimately linked to the realm of spirits. In the legends examining the relations between the ruling Malay dynasties and indigenous people, native groups are portrayed as having a closer connection to the supernatural world than the Malays. Proximity to the supernatural world is also apparent from the descriptions of the lifestyle of the Iban people in the state of Sarawak including their traditional textile, Pua Kumbu.

Myths and legends in tourism: A review of the researches conducted by Amirjamshidi *et al.* (2012), Karar (2010), Dollah and Kob (2004), reveal that mythological stories play important roles in the context of pilgrim tourism and heritage tourism. This is demonstrated in the study carried out by Amirjamshidi *et al.* (2012) that legends and religious rituals can represent important components of heritage and the cultural landscape. This is because intangible cultural attributes such as legends and religious rituals can add value and enhance the authenticity and genuineness of particular heritage sites and buildings (Amirjamshidi *et al.*, 2012). In the context of Malaysia, Dollah and Kob (2004) argue that myths of origin play a significant role in the rejuvenation and revitalisation of culture and heritage. The legend narrating that Baba and Nyonya descended from the marriage between a princess of China, Hang Li Po (who came to Melaka with 500 maids) and Sultan Mansur Shah during the 15th century has strengthened belief in their existence and identity in the historic state of Melaka (Dollah and Kob, 2004). It is also reflected in this study that the presence of Hang Li Po's well near the Chinese hill in Melaka has made the Baba and Nyonya myth of origin believable. In a place which is well-known for its mythology, Langkawi Island, myths and legends not only form components of local intangible heritage; they have also been transformed into destination attributes which can lure tourists (Aziz and Ong, 2011).

It is proposed that the inclusion of myths and legends can increase the attractiveness of tourist sites

and destinations. For example, Hassan and Isa (2014) argue that the inclusion of myths and legends in the promotion of an archeological site in Malaysia, Lenggong Valley, can enhance the desirability of this place to tourists. Similarly in the promotion of Algrave as a beach destination, it is claimed that local myths and legends can enhance the authenticity and add more value to this destination (Aranda *et al.*, 2015).

To summarise, myths and legends have played an important role in the development cultural heritage tourism and it is apparent that places associated with fascinating mythological stories can be commercialised for tourism. Therefore, the analysis in this study helps to fill the gap in knowledge about tourism and mythology with an assessment of the representation of native traditional tales in promotional material.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analysis of native myths and legends contained in promotional tourist material was carried out using content analysis. Content analysis is a method which has been used by many researchers in investigating the contents of media and printed materials. According to Prasad (2008), "content denotes what is contained and content analysis is the analysis of what is contained in a message". In his recent research, Krippendorff (2010) defined content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts or other meaningful matter to the context of their use". Furthermore, this method can be used to examine both quantitative and qualitative components (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). This technique has been commonly employed to examine tourist destination images and representations. As this study utilises both quantitative and qualitative approaches in investigating the tourism portrayal of myths, it is appropriate to adopt content analysis.

The data selected for analysis were promotional brochures published by Malaysian national bodies from 1962-2015. In the assessment of the portrayal of myths only brochures which were published in the English language were selected for examination. As this research concentrates on the representation of indigenous myths, the assessment only focuses on two well-known native tales associated with Mount Kinabalu and Monsopiad included in tourism brochures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mount Kinabalu's Myth. Mount Kinabalu's myth is incorporated in brochures published from 1969-2015. As

part of the description of Mount Kinabalu, 21 brochures mention that the myth of this mountain is closely linked to the Kadazan Dusun people. The myth first appears in the city brochure published in 1969 and subsequently in three other brochures published in the 1970s. However, there is no mention of it in any of the brochures published in the 1980s. It is generally as part of the description of the natural attractions in the state of Sabah. The Kadazan Dusun people believe that Mount Kinabalu is a sacred site as it is the resting place for their souls when they die. For example, two of the earliest brochures featuring the Mount Kinabalu myth claim that “to the Kadazan people, Mt. Kinabalu is known as Akinabalu meaning the revered place of the dead, for Mt. Kinabalu is considered by them to be the final resting place of their spirits when they die”. The narrative included in these brochures is actually only part of the Kadazan Dusun mythology linked to Mount Kinabalu. Liang (1985) says that the souls of dead people will climb to the summit of this mountain which is their last destination. However, again according to Liang (1985), other components of the mythology which include details of the sites their dead spirits will pass through and stop at before reaching the final destination and what is going to happen afterwards are not included in the brochures.

There is a significant increase in the inclusion of this myth in the brochures published from 2000-2007. The assessment of this myth over the years identified a slight alteration in the description of this tale as represented in the brochures published from 1990-2007. It is added in these brochures that “no wonder long ago” or “the older folk believe that”. This modification implies a change in values of the Kadazan Dusun people over the years. Although, only a few words have been added, it suggests an important message to readers that younger generations of the Kadazan Dusun people may not maintain their traditional beliefs. This finding is supported by who states that in the past, Dusun people would not climb this sacred mountain because of their traditional belief; if they really did have to go up the mountain, offerings and rituals had to be made and taboos complied with in order to avoid misfortune. As visitors are allowed to climb Mount Kinabalu today, encouraged by promotions in the brochures, it shows that traditional beliefs are not strictly adhered to.

In the context of tourism representation to be able to convey this message to tourists is regarded as crucial, particularly for native peoples who are commonly portrayed as being backward. Four other brochures use a similar statement in describing the myth associated with the mountain: “no wonder that long ago, the Kadazan Dusun named it Aki Nabal or home of the spirits of the dead”. However, it is depicted in the brochures published relatively recent that.

The mountain itself has long been regarded as sacred to the local Kadazan Dusun people, who consider its brooding peaks the resting place of the spirits of their departed ancestors. Till today, ceremonies are still being performed to appease the spirits of the ancestors, hence one of Sabah’s names-Land of the Sacred Mountain.

This quote demonstrates that contemporary Kadazan Dusun people still strongly believed in the myth and related rituals. One of the reasons contributing to the increasing attention in myths and legends recently can be attributed to the growing attention given to preserving the past (Reiss, 2006) even among indigenous ethnic groups in Malaysia.

In the context of tourism, the analysis of the representation of myths shows not only that Mount Kinabalu has a significant meaning to local people, spiritually and culturally; it has also been one of the main attractions promoted to visitors from the 1960s to the present day. Although, Mount Kinabalu and its myth has been incorporated into various categories of brochure, they were mainly featured in city brochures which represent the earliest material used in the promotion of tourism in Malaysia. Over the years, the myth of Mount Kinabalu has come to be included in thematic brochures promoting the main mountains and hills in Malaysia and state brochures advertising Sabah.

Legend of Monsopiad: Another indigenous tale included in the brochures is story of the legendary Kadazan Dusun warrior, Monsopiad. This myth is mostly told as part of the promotion of the monsopiad cultural village in Sabah. It reflects one of the traditional practices of the Kadazan Dusun people, headhunting. Overall, this legend is represented in 15 brochures. The tale first appeared in the brochure published in 2007 which claimed that “some 300 year ago in a village in Penampang, Sabah, there lived a great kadazan warrior named monsopiad. So, great was his power that no enemy could defeat him. During his lifetime in order to protect his village, Monsopiad took the heads of 42 enemies”. A longer version of this tale is included in another brochure which states that.

Long ago, Kizabon, the daughter of the kuai village’s headman was blessed with a baby boy named Monsopiad. During her pregnancy, her husband, Dunggou, realized a sacred Bugong bird had nested and laid eggs on the roof of their house. Such a good omen was a sign that their child would possess extraordinary abilities. When their child was born, the Bugang eggs hatched.

The inclusion of the myth associated with Monsopiad and the headhunting tradition reveals several key aspects relating to the Kadazan Dusun people. First, this myth highlights that Monsopiad was a very brave

warrior who possessed supernatural abilities. His courage as a warrior was also evident through his ability to kill and cut off many enemy heads. In fact, traditionally the Kadazan Dusun strongly encouraged their young men to participate in this practice as it symbolises adulthood and bravery (Liang, 1985). Furthermore, following the narrative of Monsopiad myth, some brochures stated that his direct descendants constructed the cultural village dedicated to him in order to commemorate him and share their stories with others. This shows that modern Kadazan Dusun people are proud of their ancestor's bravery and they are even willing to be the guardians of this tourist attraction.

Monsopiad's bravery was intimately linked to the traditional practice of headhunting. In the context of tourism representation, myths depicting such an unusual traditional practice can help to project images of Otherness which is regarded as a reputable strategy to attract tourists in destination marketing. This view is also supported by Gingging (2007) who argues that headhunting can further accentuate Kadazan Dusun people as other as this traditional practice is regarded as peculiar and brutal. However, the positive perspective of headhunting is that it is unique and can highlight the distinct identity of this particular ethnic group. The importance of this tradition to tourism in Sabah is reflected through images of human skulls commonly exploited as part of the cultural images of Kadazan Dusun people and their longhouses. The myth depicting Monsopiad's past headhunting practice either directly or indirectly demonstrates a close connection to nature.

Through the narrative of both myths, it is symbolically linked to natural resources including a specific bird and a natural site. The literature on indigenous myths claims that nature is a source of mystical power, particularly through the tales of Mount Kinabalu. Native myths demonstrate that community life in the past depended heavily on natural resources and therefore people had to treat them with great care and respect. Sacredness and taboos can act as protection to sustain these resources. The relationship with past generations is evident in the myth of Mount Kinabalu which is still regarded as sacred as it the resting site for the ancestors. The myths are also close to the supernatural world as is evident through tales involving magic and supernatural occurrences. Besides, the conceptual aspect of bravery associated with past warriors such as Monsopiad includes not only physical strength but also a spiritual component. The source of their strength and powers is directly and revealed that the worldview of Kadazan Dusuns involved a belief in spirits and the afterlife.

Furthermore, myths and legends have featured in several categories of brochure published by the Malaysian national tourism organisations over a long period. These include brochures produced to promote national, state, specific destination and thematic attractions. Although, only a small number of the mythological stories are presented here, this still shows that myths and legends play an important part of tourist attractions in Malaysia. Not only have they featured in the different categories of brochure mentioned above but there is also a specific brochure for Malaysian myths and legends called "Treasured Malaysian Legends". The findings of this research support the argument of previous scholars, that myths and legends are mostly employed in the promotion of cultural and heritage attractions and that their incorporation can accentuate the image of these attractions and sites. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that in addition to cultural heritage sites, myths and legends have also been incorporated into the promotion of natural sites and natural resources.

Overall, the findings of this study extend our understanding in the area of tourism and mythology. It has been shown that the types of myth selected for inclusion in Malaysian tourism brochures and the parts of the myths featured, complement the tourism attractions. Based on the myths assessed in this study, it is apparent that the parts of the myths which have been commoditised in the brochures are the ones that illustrate the uniqueness of particular ethnic groups and sites.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has analysed the portrayal of native myths in promotional tourist brochures published by Malaysian tourism bodies from 1969-2015, through the assessment of two traditional tales: Mount Kinabalu and Monsopiad, using a content analysis technique. Overall, findings show that Mount Kinabalu's myth has been incorporated into the brochures published from 1969-2015 while the legend of Monsopiad has been included in the brochures published from 2007-2015. The findings demonstrate that there are specific attributes associated with the Kadazan Dusun people presented as part of their myths in the brochures. The analysis of the myth of Mount Kinabalu demonstrates that the values of the Kadazan Dusun people have shifted over the years. The representation of indigenous myths featured in tourism brochures reflects that the Kadazan Dusuns are intimately linked to their ancestors, nature and the supernatural world. Finally, it is evident that places associated with fascinating mythological stories including native myths and legends can be commoditised to attract tourists.

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