

Sacred Narratives and their Potential Contribution to Cultural Tourism in Malaysia

Mohamad Luthfi Abdul Rahman

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang 11800, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on sacred narratives found in Malaysia, in particular in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia and their potential contribution to the cultural tourism sector in Malaysia. Sacred narratives refer to oral stories regarding beliefs that were regarded as sacrosanct and inherited since time immemorial by the Malay society. In the traditional context, such stories provide a set of guidelines, rules and prohibitions to be observed in our daily lives. Apart from its correlation with traditional beliefs, this article argues that sacred narratives have an enormous potential to be fostered as one of the factors that can help to boost the country's tourism industry. In order to provide evidence, this article will examine the method used by some tour operators particularly in Langkawi Island and Mount Jerai, Kedah to highlight sacred narratives in those tourist locations that they were operating in as a tactic to attract tourists. Based on this success, this article suggests that the involved parties in the tourism industry should mobilise efforts in a more systematic manner to gather sacred stories, to promote the unique features of these stories through websites, as well as to shape and to place skillful storytellers of sacred narratives in the various tourist locations. This article suggests that concerned parties should exploit this advantage as a potential to boost cultural tourism, a sector that is currently growing in

this country.

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E-mail address:

luthfi@usm.my

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INTRODUCTION

The discussion of oral stories, including sacred narratives in the Malay world has never been neglected, although the corpus

of written and modern literature accorded much space in seminars, conferences and publications. This situation has occurred due to a number of factors; researchers who have shown little interest in oral literature, a field that includes sacred narratives; a dearth of notable scholars who are keen to explore and promote this field; and the low probability of discussing new findings during important seminar meetings. Equally important, sacred narratives have the potential of providing material for cultural tourism as in the case of the island of Bali, Indonesia.

Deriving from this importance, this article examines the significance of sacred stories that are considered sacrosanct to a society by providing evidence that will prove their sacredness based on a number of features. Then, this article will examine the potential of these sacred narratives as a medium to motivate the country's tourism industry particularly from the aspect of cultural tourism in Malaysia. Both objectives are important to answer the question of whether sacred stories have to be preserved in society as part of its belief system or can they be moved to a wider space, to be mobilised as an economic generating medium through the tourism sector.

CONCEPTS AND METHOD

The data of this study comprise oral stories with sacred features which were either obtained through fieldwork or derived from published books. According to Osman (1982), compiling stories at fieldwork is most important method in oral literature

research. The fieldwork was conducted in a number of districts in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia, as well as the island of Bali for the purposes of comparison. The study site of this fieldwork consisted of areas that have evolved into tourist attractions in both these countries.

This article is discussed from the perspective of scholars who have problematised the concept of sacred narratives in a particular society. For example, William (1984) argued that myths or sacred narratives were "true narratives" because of the capacity of this kind of story to transmit important messages to society; more importantly, they were assumed to be true, sacred and could not be ridiculed. Dundes (1984) a famous folklorist, whose view converges with William Basscom, had provided a definition that was insightful. To him, myths that are inherent in these sacred narratives approximate to a man's journey of life: "*A myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form*". In other words, stories that are sacred normally recount the origin of a phenomenon which involves life in this world and also that of man from ancient to contemporary times. Dundes (1965) opined that stories were quite different compared to oral stories or *folktales* which were solely fictional in character. For the ancient society, myths contain a high level of truth, hence Dundes contended that there was a high level of confidence towards sacred narratives in certain aspects of a religious belief until today. It is highly probable that rituals or ceremonies in certain religious

practices today stem from beliefs in sacred narratives from ancient times. If this can be proven true, then it can be said that sacred narratives indeed continue to exist and wield an influence on the life of society today although for some modern societies. Apart from that, Osman and Ahmad (2004) saying that stories such as it was could be narrated by either amateur storyteller or professional.

Local scholars who were spurred by Dundes' definition included Mat Piah et al. (2000) who characterized myths as stories that were considered by society as being true and sacred. The figure or character involved in myths usually comprises a spirit, deity, or half-deity. Mat Piah et al. (2000) also stated that myths which had sacred elements provided one of the bases of a belief regarding a phenomenon by the society which owned and inherited these sacred narratives. Taib (1991) also had said once that such type of stories was known as legends or *Keramat*.

Seigel (1999) suggested that myths often co-existed with certain rituals. According to him, "*Myths and rituals operate together... myth and rituals cannot exist without each other*". The rites concerned were probably in the form of ceremonies, worship, the practice of feasting the spirit etc. Indirectly, the presence of rituals in these sacred narratives would be better believed because of physical evidence in order to show that the society concerned truly respects and believes the stories.

Based on the perspectives of Western and Malaysian scholars, it can be concluded that in the traditional context, oral stories

which are sacred in nature necessarily consist of the following distinctive features:

i) pure in nature, sanctified and assumed to be true by the society which owns the sacred narratives.

ii) associated with the beliefs of a society

iii) the characters comprise a human being or an abnormal human being

iv) ritualistic practices

Stories with such features have endured till today although they appear to be hidden and relatively unknown. Certain community groups in rural areas have stored these stories in their memories and would often narrate them to their grandchildren. At times, these stories are regarded as lessons to be learnt, taboos and rules of daily life for the younger generation. Although such stories are not easily proven, the society which owns these beliefs is proud of its heritage and would recount these stories to any interested party without any sense of awkwardness.

FINDING

Indeed, ancient society believed that sacred narratives were not to be mocked at as they have actually occurred in ancient times. Vansina (1985) viewed sacred narratives as part of an oral tradition; they were able to stand on their own as a historical source. This is because these narratives are informed by cultural values and beliefs of that society which have been passed on from one generation to another. In this context, stories such as "Mahsuri" in Langkawi Island, "Cerita Tok Syekh" as

well as “Batu Kapal” in Mount Jerai in Kedah are regarded by the local community as credible in terms of their existence and sacredness. The story of Mount Jerai was also documented in the document/ *Handbook of Oral History in Lembah Bujang* (Musa, 2015). This handbook is a research collaboration between the Northern Corridor Implementation Authority (NCIA) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

For instance, each and every generation in Langkawi knows who Mahsuri was, her character and the tough challenges she faced until her murderous death which occurred between 1817-1821. Mahsuri was a woman slandered by a village headman named Wan Yahaya. The slander was based on the jealousy of his wife, Wan Mahora, because Mahsuri was beautiful and attracted many men including her husband. Mahsuri was wrongfully accused of committing adultery with a traveller when her husband was not at home. Without any inquiry, the village headman sentenced Mahsuri to death. The sacred aspect emphasized in each and every narration was the oozing of white blood from Mahsuri’s body when she was stabbed. This caused Mahsuri to put a curse on Langkawi that it would be in a state of unrest for seven generations (Ku Ahmad Bin Ku Sulong, personal communication, Mac 5, 2013). Mahsuri’s curse was also believed to have truly happened by the local people as Siam evidently mounted an attack on Langkawi in 1821 which destroyed the island causing it to suffer decades of decline and neglect. The truthfulness of Mahsuri’s story was reinforced with the emergence of

Mahsuri’s seventh generation in Thailand around the year 2000, in the form of a beautiful Wan Aishah Wan Nawawi.

In the case of Tok Syeikh, findings from the field work conducted by the author in 2010 and 2014 revealed that the local community was truly convinced of his existence although there was no scientific evidence to prove this. In the same vein, specific locations on Mount Jerai, the dwelling of this personality, were conserved and not desecrated. Similar taboos were imposed on the area of “Batu Kapal” where the ship which was cursed had turned into stone. The legend of Batu Kapal refers to a giant named Sang Kelembai who once lived in Mount Jerai. According to oral stories narrated by the elders, Sang Kelembai possessed the ability to curse things into stone. Among those he cursed was a huge ship. Apart from stones that resemble a ship, images of men’s heads, fish, huge fingers in the form of stone are also visible till today (Ramli Aziz, personal communication, May 4, 2014) and notes on the area in Mount Jerai. Rahman (2013) also said that area of “Batu Kapal”, known as “Black Territory” in Mount Jerai.

Another informant, Pak Harun, said the local community believed that the cursed area surrounding Batu Kapal reflected “a black region” because it was inhabited by a giant; conversely, Tok Syeikh’s area, a short distance away, was regarded as a “white region” due to Tok Syeikh’s piety. This “white” region was inhabited by a religious man named Syeikh Abdullah al-Yamani. According to the notes in *Hikayat*

Merong Mahawangsa (edition 1998), Syeikh Abdullah was said to have arrived from Mecca. According to Pak Harun, it is possible that Syeikh Abdullah was accompanied by Arab traders to Kedah once upon a time. In this area, there was a wide field and a well that is related to the Syeikh's dwelling when he arrived in Mount Jerai. This field is said to be a place of worship and regarded holy. However, the local community believed that the Syeikh had disappeared after outsiders began to visit this place for superstitious reasons. Till today, the wide, open stony space is called "Padang Tok Syeikh" (Harun Bin Ahmad, personal communication, September 7, 2010) and notes on Mount Jerai.

What is the connection between these sacred narratives and ritualistic practices? Using Seagal's (1999) perspective as a guide, a story that is regarded as sacrosanct is required to be accompanied by certain rituals. In the context of the oral story of Langkawi and Mount Jerai, indeed such rituals did exist. According to informant Ku Ahmad Ku Sulong, a retired teacher and who once served in Kota Mahsuri, Mahsuri's tomb was regarded as sanctified by some members of the society as it could fulfil their wishes; in fact, a few worshipping practices were conducted in that area before conservation work was carried out by the government around the 1980s. As a follow-up to the incident, the tomb was relocated in order to circumvent such ritualistic practices. However, during the fieldwork in 2015, it was found that such practices still occurred, but they had taken a different

form. For example, at the end of the tomb's site was a box full of Thai currency which was believed to have been filled by visitors from Thailand for purposes of having their vows fulfilled and their spiritual intentions realized.

Likewise, in Mount Jerai, Tok Syeikh's abode became a site of meditation by some people. According to an informant named Nor Ramzee Ishak (civil servant), Mount Jerai was often frequented by those who were interested to pursue metaphysical knowledge as well as shamanic spiritual practice. They often prayed and recited Quranic verses all night long. There might be some truth in this as a number of web and blog sites have highlighted the fact that people have been conducting rites in the aforementioned location. As such, the sacred element in Tok Syeikh's story indeed existed, it was then extended to some rituals which are still conducted by practitioners of traditional medicine. Apart from meditation, magical spells were also recited when they visited the site as a condition to acquiring their metaphysical knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The Potential of Sacred Narratives in Malaysia for Cultural Tourism

Theoretically, there is a basis for linking sacred narratives to tourism. In this regard, Janos (2012), provided the following definition of cultural tourism:

"Cultural tourism can be defined as that activity which enables people to experience the different ways of life other

people, thereby gaining at first hand an understanding of their customs, traditions, the physical environment, the intellectual ideas and those places of architectural, historic, archaeological or other cultural significance which remain from earlier times...

There are various types of cultural tourism. These include *heritage tourism, cultural thematic routes, cultural city tourism and cultural tours, tradition ethnic tourism, event and festival tourism, religious tourism and pilgrimage routes, creative culture and creative tourism*. Heritage tourism is a suitable category in order to explain the importance of folklore or oral tradition, specifically the use of legends and local myths as a tourist attraction. As Janos (2012) contended, heritage tourism “enables people to experience the different ways of life of other people...” (Janos, 2012). The sacred narratives found in the tourist site certainly will foreground characters, plot and story motifs which are different and unheard of prior to this. Consequently, the use of these sacred narratives will provide new experiences and knowledge to tourists.

The island of Bali, Indonesia is a perfect example of how a country in Southeast Asia exploits sacred narratives and rituals for the purpose of cultural tourism. The tradition of storytelling in Bali, known as *Satua* (Suastika, 2011). Bali employs four popular sacred narratives, namely, the stories of “Tanah Lot”, “Tirta Empul”, “Rambut Siwi” and “Naga Basuki”. In contrast to the stories in Langkawi or Mount Jerai, the

background of Bali’s sacred stories illustrate the place of worship of Bali’s Hindu society. These stories problematised the origin of the formation of “Pura-Pura”, that is the temple or the huge place of worship in Bali which has remained in its undamaged condition till today.

In the author’s fieldwork in 2014 and 2015, it was found that every resident, regardless of age, inhabiting the areas relating to the four sacred narratives, knew the stories that explained the creation of “Pura-Pura”. In fact, in the village of Besakih in Kabupaten Karangasem where the story of “Naga Basuki” originated, the statue of a huge dragon near the main entrance of Pura Besakih was displayed. Naga Basuki refers to a huge dragon which occupied a cave in the village concerned. A king named Mpu Sidimantra from Jawa often visited this cave in order to obtain spiritual knowledge to guard the well-being and the safety of his people. One fine day Mpu Sidimantra sent his son, Ida Manik Angkeran, to face the dragon as he was indisposed. The son, a gambler, soon met the dragon and brought a message from his father. However, after the dragon turned to re-enter the cave, Manik Angkeran, upon seeing a huge diamond at the end of the dragon’s tail, took a knife and cut off the dragon’s tail and absconded with the diamond. Angered, Naga Basuki licked Manik Angkeran’s footstep, and all of a sudden fire engulfed Manik Angkeran’s body.

Worried that his son had not returned home, Mpu Sidimantra proceeded towards Besakih, performed a number of devotional

rituals to coax a reluctant dragon to reemerge from the cave. Sidimantra appealed to Naga Basuki to revive his son and promised to use his magical powers to reconnect the dragon's tail. An agreement was reached and Manik Angkeran was then decreed to live in Desa Besakih as a cleaner of that place of worship. Anxious that his son would flee to Jawa, Sidimantra used his magical powers to part the land with his staff, thus separating Jawa from Bali (Suarka & Cika, 2013). According to Komang Hendra, one of the workers at Pura Besakih, the elders keep recounting the tale of Naga Basuki being a caretaker of the area as well as Gunung Agung, which was behind Pura Besakih. To symbolise that belief, the statue of the dragon which was erected remained on a permanent basis in that place. Likewise, Pura Besakih also remained eternally as the biggest Pura among all the oldest Puras in Bali.

Ritualistic practices have gained prominence in Bali because of the symbiotic relationship between the sacred narratives of Bali and its religious beliefs. For example, in Pura Tanah Lot rituals conducted included the presentation of *sesajen*, that is "performance" or "offerings" to God as a sign of gratitude, and prayers apart from drinking "holy water" which was believed to be located in the lower part of the Pura. In Malaysia, such ritualistic practices are regarded as superstitions and are in conflict with the tenets of Islam. Nevertheless, sacred narratives should not be ignored in the agenda of the state's economic development. The state government has

promoted tourism by publicizing these sacred narratives via websites, replicas and notice boards in tourist sites as well as hiring skilled story tellers to work in these areas. Kedah, for instance, provides an excellent example of how sacred narratives can be mobilized for the purpose of cultural tourism. Kedah's tourism is made more vibrant with the discovery of a recent archaeological site in Sungai Batu in 2007 which also exhibited sacred features with the accompaniment of certain rituals found on particular monuments (Stephen & Andaya, 2011).

Sacred Narratives in Tourism Websites

Trevor (2009), a folklorist, once visualized a scenario of oral history including sacred narratives and folklore that would reach the public through the development of new rechnology. The accuracy of Trevor's perspective is shown in the way the management of Mount Jerai in Kedah promoted the place as a tourist site. With reference to the website of jeraihill.theregency.com.my, the management had included photos that were connected to Tok Syeikh's story and also Batu Kapal. The photos would attract the attention of potential tourists who would then be motivated to read the sacred narratives and visit the places. In the website (<https://www.langkawi-insight.com/langkawi>), a complete story of the legend of Mahsuri was displayed, including her background, the episode of the curse which was regarded as sacred at that time, and Mahsuri's tomb site.

Sacred Narratives in the Form of Replicas and Notes in the Tourist Site

Apart from websites, sacred narratives also appeared in the form of huge replicas in the main tourist areas in Langkawi and Mount Jerai. According to Samsudin and Mohamad (2013), the construction of a monument or replica related to a story about the place will attract more tourist's attention. For example, in Langkawi, Kota Mahsuri was built and within it was a replica of Mahsuri's tomb and house. According to the informants, the replica of the built house was almost like Mahsuri's actual house. Beside the tomb, Mahsuri's story was made accessible to tourists. According to Ku Ahmad Ku Sulong (67 years), spokesperson of Kota Mahsuri, tourists will normally request a recount of Mahsuri's story.

Meanwhile, in Mount Jerai, the legend of Tok Syeikh and Batu Kapal had appeared in a constructed form and documented at the peak of Mount Jerai. The depiction of Tok Syeikh's presence is projected through a well which was already in existence and restored by the Kedah state government. It was believed that Tok Syeikh had used the well while living on the peak of Mount Jerai a long time ago. This oral story is so interesting that it was included in the narrative of Mount Jerai's historical museum.

The Historical Museum of Mount Jerai provides notes on the background of Mount Jerai from its geological aspect as well as notes of oral stories which are discussed in this article. In addition, small replicas of ships which are connected to ports once

upon a time are also displayed. On the other hand, the Archaeological Museum of Lembah Bujang was more focused on the display of archaeological displays in the area concerned as artifacts that have been discovered. Apart from general information regarding Mount Jerai, the story of Batu Kapal and Tok Syeikh was also displayed in this museum and had attracted the attention of visitors.

The Story Teller in the Tourist Site

During the fieldwork at Mahsuri's tomb, the author encountered a retired teacher known as Pak Ku (real name Ku Ahmad bin Ku Sulong), a tourist guide cum story teller of Mahsuri's story. The storytelling facilitated the public's understanding of the famous legend. Apart from seeing the replica of Mahsuri's house, Mahsuri's well and her tomb, visitors are able to understand the stories behind the site. Such storytellers were also found in Mount Jerai. The management hires workers, some local residents who are familiar with the stories, to help tourists to visit the surrounding sites besides recounting the mystical or sacred tales. As Vansina (1965) remarked, the role of articulate storytellers was crucial to ensure that the oral tradition would survive and shared with the public.

A recent development in Kedah was the discovery of Sungai Batu's archaeological site in 2007 (Saidin et al., 2011). Saidin who was directly involved in this archaeological discovery in Sungai Batu in 2007, for example, viewed these oral stories, whether they were mystical or legendary, as crucial

to archaeological tourism, an initiative of the Centre for Archaeological Research, USM in 2015 (Saidin, personal communication, October 10, 2017). In depicting the archaeological site as the main icon of Kedah's tourism, Saidin viewed this icon as requiring other elements which existed around it such as hospitality, transport system including the presence of legends and mystical phenomena to help make the place more interesting to outside tourists. To Mokhtar, the sacred narratives of Mount Jerai, located at a short distance from the archaeological site, is a potential that cannot be left idle; instead it has to be promoted to help develop archaeological tourism in Lembah Bujang/Sungai Batu.

Cognisant of this importance, the Northern Corridor Implementation Authority (NCIA) had initiated the search for new potential to develop archaeological tourism in Merbok/Mount Jerai. Among others is the oral history training programme of Lembah Bujang conducted for tourist guides in the Merbok area in 2014. In this programme, the participants were exposed to the theory and practice of oral history and the heritage of Lembah Bujang. This resulted in the production of a book titled *The Handbook of the Oral History of Lembah Bujang* by Mahani Musa which contains historical information, archaeology and local knowledge gathered by the participants of the programme through interviews with informed village dwellers. This handbook is a guide to help potential tour guides of the Lembah Bujang area to transmit information/interesting stories to

tourists visiting the archaeological site and surrounding areas. Indirectly, it will yield revenue for the tour guides concerned.

Challenges to Exploit the Potential of Sacred Narratives as a Medium for Cultural Tourism

In this contemporary era, oral stories can be used to promote tourism on a global scale, and in this way, they can regain their lost lustre. These stories can be channeled via websites, the construction of replicas on a large scale and also transmitted by a group of trained story tellers in designated tourist sites.

However, challenges to sustain these sacred narratives via the tourism sector still exist. One main problem is the high cost of promoting tourism, updating websites and training story tellers. Mindful of this, tour operators might lose interest in this project in the long run. As well, they might not fully understand the utility of sacred narratives in preserving intangible heritage. Instead, they might focus on aspects of tangible heritage such as heritage buildings, food, equipment, clothes etc. If this happens, the sustenance and use of such sacred narratives will come to a complete stop. This worry has a basis to it, for example, the tour operators in Gunung Keriang, Kedah did not exploit the legendary curse of Sang Kelembai which is linked to the hill to attract the attention of visitors. In other words, although the stories are known to the locals, they were not exploited to attract tourists following the failure of the tour operators in understanding

the potential of the heritage stories of the community to the concerned industry.

To overcome this challenge, the government needs to introduce an act or regulation which is capable of gazettement the heritage of sacred narratives owned by the community in the place concerned so that the cultural heritage is protected. Tour operators have to be reminded that such stories are important for cultural tourism and need to be maintained as an attraction in their tourist sites. In such a matter, only the National Heritage Department is capable of monitoring this issue to the best of its ability. The steps taken by the USM Centre of Archaeology and the National Corridor of Implementation Authority (NCIA) have to be expanded and emulated by other agencies because these methods are novel in promoting oral stories including the sacred ones to the public. Hence, the method used by the USM Centre of Archaeology and NCIA would not only help to enhance the economic standing of the local people but in fact it would make them part of the ambassador of cultural tourism collective.

CONCLUSION

Sacred narratives revolve around oral folk tales regarding the wonder, myths and legends inherited for generations. Clearly, even with modernization, sacred narratives will continue to survive, by becoming a guide or rules for society to follow till today. In this era of technological advancement, sacred narratives, once owned and nurtured in the private domain, have the potential to boost cultural tourism on a large scale, thus

generating income for the country. Propelled to the public domain, they can now be shared and appreciated by the global citizens of the world. The government, tour operators and even the public in Malaysia should not belittle the ability of sacred narratives as a medium of tourism. We should emulate Bali as it has managed to maintain the use of its stories for the survival of the economic sector of tourism. In other words, the link between sacred narratives and cultural tourism is very close, meaningful and should be continued in the major tourist sites in this country.

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