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DANCE FOR CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY: INDIGENOUS ECO-TOURISM AT ANNAH RAIS LONGHOUSE IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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Abstract: This study foregrounds dance as a key promoter of indigenous tourism through the narratives of living artists at the longhouse of the Bidayuh community in Annah Rais. Annah Rais longhouse is located in Padawan, in the east Malaysian state of Sarawak, about 65km from the capital city of Kuching. This longhouse is designated as the eco-tourism site, hence, community-based tourism and cultural performances such as music and dance intertwine in this site to promote indigenous or ethnic culture and perpetuate Bidayuh identity while helping the community to improve income through arts-based tourism. This is a qualitative study that focuses on ethnography. This study draws data from fieldwork, especially through observations and interviews with key people in the longhouse to examine how indigenous dances contribute to both economic empowerment and the preservation of cultural heritage. The Bidayuh culture is epitomized by the Brangi Ba'uh (eagle dance), a pride of the Land Dayak community. It is presented as a welcoming dance, followed by the participatory dance, Samah Brangi (also called as the long dance). This study articulates that dance is not only a crucial element to boost eco-tourism as it stands as an attraction for day tours and homestays, but also a medium for cultural transmission and community engagement. Although sustainability is being threatened by the aging population of artists, migration of younger generations to urban cities, the risk of cultural misrepresentation, Annah Rais continues to persevere through various strategies. This research will show that the indigenous tourism's survival in Borneo depends a large part on the preservation of arts and culture. Presenting "original" ethnic dances is vital role in this process, a significant finding that has been ignored in existing scholarships.

Keywords: traditional dance, Sarawak cultural heritage, Annah Rais longhouse, indigenous tourism, eco-tourism sustainability

Introduction

"Around the globe, travelers are looking to get beyond superficial interactions with Native cultures for more in-depth experiences, like tours led by Indigenous guides and stays at Native-owned lodges. It's not just about witnessing a haka in New Zealand; it's about understanding the meaning and stories behind it." (Harmon, 2024)

I begin this article with a quote drawn from Michael Harmon for New York Times early 2024 as it resonates with my research. My research began in Sarawak Cultural Village (SCV), an award-winning living museum that houses replicas of main ethnic groups in Sarawak, located approximately 36km from the Kuching city. The focus was to examine the state of indigenous tourism in SCV, particularly of how indigenous communities and tourists engage with each other, and in the process, how both

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parties benefit through this interaction. Tourists can spend from half a day to almost a full day to learn and experience the culture of various ethnic groups. They do so by visiting ethnic houses and seeing the architecture, artifacts, food preparation, and performances. While this was the initial focus of my study, I found something amiss. My observations and interviews showed that there was lack of indigeneity amongst the performers and performances and the engagement with indigenous people.

The question of what is original or authentic kept arising during my research. Some tourists and tourist agents pointed out that although the former was able to get a glimpse of a general cultural mapping of Sarawak in half a day, some were disappointed as they were not able to see the "original" people and their culture but they were getting a "commoditized package" of the culture. For instance, we could not see the actual "Orang Ulu" people in the Ulu ethnic house. The hosts and performers were from other ethnic groups. Although dubbed as a living museum, tourists could not witness the presence of "actual" ethnic-indigenous people in the houses. The performances were forms of "mimicry" (where one ethnic group imitates the other group) and were not an "authentic" representation.

One tourist agent simply puts it this way,

"If my customers want me to show them the actual longhouse and indigenous practices, I will not take them here. I will bring them to the longhouse…. the nearest is Annah Rais." (A, personal communication, July 15, 2023)

While authenticity is commonly understood as an essence, it is a socially constructed process, that is continuously negotiated and performed through socio-political relationships towards specific ends. This study acknowledges the problem of "authenticity" since culture is not static, but a dynamic phenomenon that evolves over time and space. However, "staged authenticity", a concept put forth by Dean MacCannell, has become necessary in tourism (Greenwood, 1982, p.27). But how authentic is the "staged authenticity" is the question. What I refer to as "authentic" here is the representation of culture, presenting practices as they are being practiced in actual "longhouse" setting by the owners of the tradition. This is the point that the tour agent made in the quote above.

The name, Annah Rais, surfaced in various conversations and slowly triggered my interest. I felt drawn to this site of study. I tweaked the focus of this study and decided to return to the origin. I chose Annah Rais, located in Padawan, in the east Malaysian state of Sarawak, about 65km from the capital city of Kuching. This longhouse is surrounded by rainforest and the Padawan Mountain. Hence, it is easily accessible to natural resources. It is for this reason too that this longhouse is designated as the eco-tourism site of the Bidayuh ethnic people.

Global Ecotourism Network (GEN) in 2016 defines ecotourism as a form that is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and creates knowledge and understanding through interpretation and education of all involved (visitors, staff and the visited)" (GEN, n.d.). In this site, eco-tourism intersects with various categories of tourism such as indigenous/ethnic/community whereby visitors can experience the surrounding nature through various outdoor activities while they immerse in indoor cultural performances such as music and dance. The latter becomes means to promote ethnic-community-indigenous culture and stands to perpetuate Bidayuh identity while helping the community to improve income through arts-based tourism.

Mapping the eco-system of the people, Bidayuh is the second largest group after Iban under the Dayak community in Sarawak (Guri, 2018). In their own language, Bi means, "people" while "Dayuh" means land. Therefore, Bidayuh translates as "people of the land". They are referred as the Land Dayak, while the Iban is distinguished as the Sea Dayak. Bidayuh communities are spread and located in Bau, Padawan, Pennissen, Serian, Lundu and Siburan (see Fig.1). Majority of the population is regarded as non-Muslim indigenous community with strong prevalence of animist beliefs. Most are practicing Christians, a phenomenon that emerged due to religious conversion drive that took place during the time of First Rajah of Sarawak, Sir James Brooke regime (the White Rajah) and the colonial era.

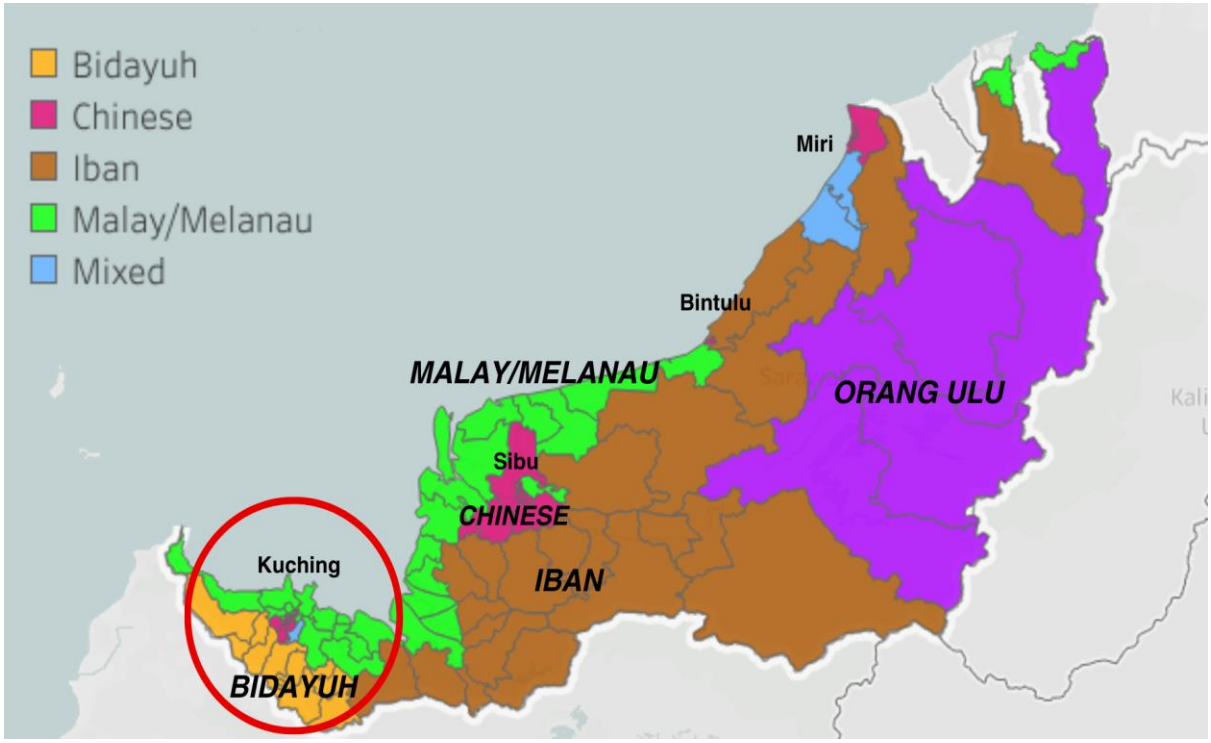

Figure 1: Composition dan Distribution of Ethnic Groups in Sarawak
(Source: Tindak Malaysia Portal with author's modification)

As Land Dayak, Bidayuh people reside on the hillside and mountain areas. Annah Rais was originally known as Kampung Sennah and was said to have existed since 1854 (Chang, 2002; Guri, 2018). The villagers practice agriculture and are farmers. Some have now moved out in search of salaried jobs in the urban cities. Villagers have also diversified the economy and have turned towards tourism, running their own homestay. It is a village immersed in nature surrounded by paddy field, mountains, rivers and trees, making it a suitable destination for eco-tourism.

Annah Rais architecture itself is an attraction as it is built mostly with bamboo, providing visitors with an experience of visiting an actual longhouse. Annah Rais, as a designated site of eco-tourism, offers many attractions such as homestay, the baruk or head house, the hot spring, river, traditional home-cooked food, Annah Rais tea specially known as Bakah Baras (described as having medicinal values), vegetables and fruits, traditional attire, and most importantly, music and dance.

Here, indigeneity is commodified but offered quite differently from the heritage tourist sites in the city. Annah Rais packages its daily life practices for tourist consumption. This also includes showcases of culture, tradition, handicraft, stories, and also performing arts. The native tourist frontliners are the indigenous people themselves. Senior dancer, Siti Mayot, is a farmer who plants paddy and vegetables. Apart from being a farmer, she also takes tourists for rafting and jungle trekking, and she is also a prolific dance performer. They are versatile and play multiple roles in the community-based tourism.

Previous literatures by Chua (2008), Gisa (2012), Ahmad Fauzi Musib (2015, 2019), Tracy Peter Samat (2011), and Tracy Peter Samat et.al (2016) have variously shown the different cultural aspects of the Annah Rais community. These scholarships have largely focused on music particularly musicians, Arthur Borman and his teacher, Abas, and musical instruments namely, Pratuokng (bamboo gong/bamboo gong zither), eco-tourism projects, and homestay programmes. Scholars have mentioned eagle dance very briefly in their writings but not from the perspective of dance ethnography, privileging the dance per se. In its own way, dance possesses much agency and power as an epistemological and ontological field of study but is largely ignored in various scholarships. This study argues that indigenous dance and music stand as a powerful medium to draw spectators in tourism contexts, and if tackled carefully could be managed for sustaining tourism. Hence, its gap and subsequent theoretical underpinning is that dance (with music) functions as a key product to promote and sustain indigenous/community/eco-tourism, particularly in the rural longhouse setting such as Annah Rais.

This research questions, how do longhouse dwellers cum artists contribute towards boosting eco-tourism through arts? How do they engage with tourists through dance and music? What do they share with each other? How does dance (with music) lead to a sustainable tourism? These are some primary questions that helped to navigate this study. The objectives of this study are to examine the role of traditional dance and music in promoting sustainable tourism in indigenous communities in Sarawak, to explore how community engagement through dance enhances cultural preservation and economic development and to analyse the challenges faced by indigenous artists in maintaining traditional practices in the face of modernization and urban migration. The findings hold practical implications for policymakers, tourism operators, and cultural preservation initiatives seeking to balance eco-tourism development with cultural integrity.

Methodology

Adopting a dance ethnographic lens, I situate dance as a promoter of indigenous tourism through the narratives of living artists at the longhouse of the Bidayuh community in Annah Rais. I conducted fieldwork three times in 2023 in Sarawak, with each trip lasting for a week. I was introduced to the dwellers of Annah Rais by one of the officers from SCV, which was my primary research site. Winner Samud is a Bidayuh ethnic origin. He was my first person of contact before I entered the Annah Rais longhouse. He took my Research Assistant and me to his longhouse. We were introduced to James Stephen Kurik, the then longhouse Chief, and Jinit Samben. Later, the recruitment of informants expanded to Arthur Borman, Siti Mayot, and several other people. Snowball sampling and purposive sampling proved to be useful sampling methods for this study. One person introduced another and our list of informants grew as we met more people. We chose our informants for a purpose considering time and funding limitations. For example, Arthur Borman introduced me to Siti Mayot and several other artistes in the longhouse. I also spoke to Karom, one of the main homestay operators. The conversation

also included informal interactions with the residents of the longhouse. Since it is a longhouse setting, one cannot avoid encountering other residents as we speak to one person. Each informant signed the consent form before participating in this research. This study is unique as it gives voice to the community itself, addressing a critical gap that can be seen in many publications on tourism.

I managed to interview ten people at this field site. These interviews were stretched over a few visits as not everyone was present during each visit. I also conducted further interviews with the same people as I had more questions in the subsequent trips. Hence, we could not speak to many people. Fortunately, informants were very friendly and were very "open" when we spoke to them. Although my assistant and I are outsiders to this community, they participated and shared their views willingly with us. We were grateful that all of our informants spoke in English. This is mainly because most of them were the front liners in tourism management and engaged with tourists on a daily basis, hence, language did not pose as a barrier for communication.

I did not participate extensively as my main focus was on observations of performances, visual and oral recordings of informal and impromptu dance and music performances as I spoke to the practitioners, and I carried out interviews with various parties such as dance and music practitioners, former chief, selected residents, travel agents, and homestay operators during my field study. Fieldwork allowed me to get first-hand information about the life in the longhouse and the cultural practices there. Conversations with the beholders or preservers of tradition aided me in understanding the struggles, hardships, possibilities, and potential in sustaining these forms. I learned the "eagle dance" from Jinit to get an embodied experience of doing the dance.

The data, gathered through interviews, were transcribed by my assistant under my guidance. I used my fieldnotes and the transcriptions to identify potential themes and issues for this writing. Dance and music recordings helped in analysing the movements.

Results and Discussion

Dance and music

There are many types of dances in the sub-ethnic Bidayuh groups, most popularly, Brangi (BIRANGGI), Langi, Sigar, and Rejang. The name, "eagle dance", is very common and in indigenous term are variously pronounced as Brangi Ba'uh, Brangi Be'uh and Brangi Bo'uh depending on the villages of the Bidayuh. The Bidayuh in Padawan, in the Annah Rais village, is referred as the Biannnah sub-group (Borman, personal communication, July 18, 2023) and call their version as the Brangi Ba'uh. Brangi Ba'uh is accompanied by live music that comprises of Pratoukng (bamboo tube zither) and hand drum. Arthur Borman, one of my key informants, is a living Pratoukng player who resides in the longhouse. He plays the instrument as a soloist and as accompanying instrumentalist for dances. He also sings as he plays the instrument. He sings traditional songs that epitomize community festivals, their work, and environment. Musicians and dancers make vital connection between their indigenous arts and ecology when they connect animals, plants, and the nature around them.

There are two types of presentation of Brangi Ba'uh in this village – Brangi Pengadap is the welcoming dance presented to tourists. It is presented with and without a long cloth held in the hands when dancing. This Brangi is performed predominantly by female dancer/s, accompanied by live music (see Fig. 2). The welcoming dance is usually less than five minutes. Once the welcoming dance is over, dancers will invite tourists to dance with them. Tourists will form a long queue behind the dancers and this is how the Samah Brangi, or the long dance name is derived.

Figure 2: Siti Mayot (left) performs the eagle dance accompanied by Arthur Borman (right) who plays the Pratoukng (Source: Author and Andrew Igai Jamu)

In normal circumstances, tourists or onlookers will witness and record the welcoming dance and musical accompaniment, and later, participate voluntarily in the long dance in an attempt to understand the Bidayuh culture. However, the interaction becomes more intensified during homestay programmes. Although, it is not a compulsory element to include entertainment in the packages, dance and music are indeed popular inclusions in the packages and are tourist "pullers". Homestay packages range in terms of its duration (few days to a week or more). During the homestay period, tourists will watch cultural performances as well as participate in the dances. Most notably, some tourists stay back after the performances to learn music and dance from the performers. Homestay programmes offer tourists the time and space to experience and embody culture which is not possible in day tours. Homestay programmes are not fully dependent on music and dance for its survival but these art forms support the sustainability of indigenous tourism in this site.

Brangi Ba'uh draws inspiration largely from the eagle bird. When I asked Jinit Samben, the cultural head at the village, why are the people close to birds, and why eagle specifically, she clarified that eagle is the epitome for strength and bravery. For further conceptualization, Chua (2008) described that in the

older days, eagle dance was performed during Adat Lama Festival to chase away evil spirits and ghosts, but through time, it has lost the original meaning, but emerged as a representation of the Bidayuh culture. It transitioned from a ritual dance to a dance that marked the ethnic identity of its people. Gisa (2012) in her account of the Bidayuh people described them as those "living close to nature" (p.3). She stressed that their identity as the "Land Dayak" is shaped by nature. She argued that the agrarian community lives close to the natural environment; hence, "naturalness" becomes part their culture and heritage. According to her again, it is largely due to their connection to the nature that the idea or origin of "eagle dance" could have emerged. When one enters the longhouse, one can witness the iconographic pose of the eagle dance, a representation or "symbol that summarizes a great part of partly biased ideas about tradition and partly the living condition of Bidayuh" (p.3).

The dance imitates the movement of the eagle bird. Arthur and Jinit explained that eagle moves in a circle looking for and catching its prey. Likewise, the dancer moves in a circle with stretched hands at the sides, gesturing the eagle. The feet are flapped inwards and outwards with movements in a circle. The feet and hand movements are repetitive. While female emerge as dancers in these sites, men accompany them as musicians.

Jinit said that she learned the eagle dance from her mother but could not recall how her mother learned the dance. She simply said that her mother learned it on her own. The origin of the longhouse eagle dance is untraceable but the dance is passed on from one generation to another. This form is unavailable in the urban city. It carries the mark of authentic dance form, a unique selling point for tourism. Jinit also highlighted that "tourism is very encouraging in this longhouse. We have visitors every day, tourists from abroad and those from here …. There are 11 homestays here and when tourist come, they will ask for performance" (Jinit Samben, personal communication, July 18, 2023).

This study articulates that dance is a crucial element to boost eco-tourism as it stands as an attraction for day tours and homestays. It also strengthens the engagement between the community and tourists through performances, a key to sustainable tourism. Although sustainability is being threatened by the declining number of native dancers and the rise of urban-based cultural heritage tourism sites, Annah Rais continues to persevere through various strategies. This research will show that indigenous tourism's survival in Borneo depends a large part on the preservation of arts and culture and presenting "original" ethnic dances play a vital role in this process, a significant finding that has been ignored in existing scholarships.

Sustainability of Dance and Music Practices and Challenges

UN World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as a "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UN World Tourism Organization, n.d.). The tourism is expected to use wisely the environmental resources, respect socio-cultural authenticity of host communities while conserving living cultural and traditional heritage and ensure viable economic operations that benefit all parties. Global Sustainable Tourism Council states in its website that sustainable tourism refers to the "environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee

its long-term sustainability" (Global Sustainable Tourism Council, n.d.). I refer to these definitions as I investigate the socio-economic and socio-cultural dynamics in Annah Rais. I am particularly interested to see how the three dimensions are inter-related here. Environment, economy and arts work hand-in-hand in promoting eco-tourism in this longhouse context.

This paper is not making a conclusive statement that dance will lead to sustainable development but rather interrogates to what extent dance can promote sustainability. The fact that tourism in Sarawak is largely dependent on heterogenous ethnic community and their cultural practices cannot be ignored and has been highlighted in the government policies and academic scholarships. Dance and music play a key role in the promotion of culture. The search for authenticity has drawn many tourists to visit longhouses. It is also a trend today for longhouses to present welcome dance. This welcome dance is presented in a commercial space such as SCV and in traditional longhouses. However, the difference is that the welcome dance at the longhouses seems to carry more weight as it is presented by the indigenous people. It is sufficed to say that it does not matter how simple the rendition of dance and music is but the point us who presents them.

In Annah Rais, my subjects of study have shared that regardless of a day trip or homestay, tourists request for dance and music performances, a fact that underscores the importance of arts in tourism. This is perpetuated by the chain of networking or "social networking", a term that was first coined by John Barnes in 1954, and used by dance scholar Stepputat to discuss the networking in Kecak groups within the context of tourism in Bali (Stepputat, 2014, p. 118). The "actors" of the networking in Annah Rais are tour guides/agents, homestay operators, and artists. This networking is crucial for the success, or rather, to ensure sustainability of this tourism. I see the dynamics of this three-pronged relationship very clearly in Annah Rais. The key players of the tourism are the community members, who are empowered economically and culturally. In this context, commercialization of indigenous practices for tourism allows economic earning and the survival of the traditional arts. The shifting of power to the community to manage its tourism has enhanced the tourism and its attitude towards tourism. Homestays are managed by longhouse dwellers, who are contacted by tour operators. Homestay owners contact artists in the longhouse for dance and music performances. The income that is generated through this operation is divided amongst the various stakeholders. This factor plays a key role in sustaining cultural practices in the longhouses, keeping the traditions alive.

Dance (with music) plays a large part in this tourism. As shared by informants, there are performances every day during the peak seasons and regular during off-peak seasons. How do community and tourist engage with one another and what do each get out of this encounter? The performances do not just serve to entertain tourists but extends to bodily transmission of native knowledge when tourists participate in the "long dance". In certain circumstances, it goes beyond performances where some stay back to talk to the musicians and dancers and learn the traditional art forms. The community, by displaying and teaching its traditional practices, become self-employed and earn an income in this process. They become the ambassadors of arts and culture for their site. This exchange also enables the people to learn and enhance their spoken language (English) and learn foreign culture when tourists share their skill and knowledge with the people.

The biggest challenge lies in the continuity of traditional practices. From the lives of my key informants, Arthur, Siti, and Jinit, I have gathered that their successors are their own family members. For example,

Jinit learned dance from her mother, and she has now taught it to her daughter. I see the same trend with Arthur and Siti. Besides their children, they have taught a small group of other children in the longhouse. If their children or immediate students do not continue the lineage, there is a risk that the tradition could die, a phenomenon that is already happening in Sarawak villages.

Moreover, the current population of artists are already ageing, and the younger generation is keener to move to urban cities for further education and to find salaried jobs. This dilemma between upkeeping tradition and embracing modernity poses a challenge in ensuring a sustainable tourism growth in the villages/longhouses. There is also another risk whereby when these "authentic" dances decline, they are reinvented or revived for commercial purposes, mostly in the urban cities, deviating from their original structure, style, and meaning. This could lead to the problem of misrepresentation of culture. Sarawak boasts of heterogeneity of culture among various ethnic groups and is fiercely proud of diversity, but this could potentially challenge that aspiration.

In the current state, generational transmission of dance and music is limited to families and those close to these families. There is a concern about the attitude of the younger generation as they are more interested in non-traditional forms such as Pop music dan dance. Modern gadgets have also diverted their attention to other forms of online entertainment. Dancers only come together to practice when there is an event, thus, trainings are not carried out on a regular basis. Dancers also migrate to urban cities to pursue their studies and for better job opportunities creating barriers for continuity/sustainability of arts. This could cause long term impacts on preservation of indigenous cultural practices if not carefully managed.

This study would like to propose strategies for the betterment of the tourism. Some of these strategies are not new as they stemmed from the study. The current effort taken by the local artists to uphold intergenerational transmission of artistic practices within and outside the families is indeed a good practice to sustain cultural practices from diminishing. However, such practices must be intensified through regular training sessions within the community, for instance, through community-led training programs for youth. It is another way of sustaining the form. Cultural institutions and communities could work hand-in-hand in promoting and preserving indigenous heritage. This was initially practiced by SCV but was not sustained. Partnerships could enhance and support the initiatives taken by both parties.

Conclusion and Future Research

This research contributes to the discourse on sustainable tourism through the intersection of environmental, economic, and cultural dimensions. It demonstrates that the success of eco-tourism in Sarawak depends largely on preserving local arts and highlights the potential of traditional dance as a cornerstone for fostering sustainable, community led tourism. It finds that there is a high potential for traditional dances (with music accompaniment) such as the Bidayuh community's eagle dance, to support indigenous tourism as the search for authentic dances is viable in today's tourism. Tourists, both local and foreign, are not just keen to engage with the ecology and environment, but also want to interact with the community socio-culturally through food, handicrafts, artifacts, architectures, indigenous myths and stories, dance and music. Dance is a powerful medium of entertainment and

cultural transmission in day tours and homestays in the longhouses while fostering economic benefits through collaborative network. This is evident at the Annah Rais longhouse observed for this study. Community members and tourism operators, however, should strategize ways to secure beneficial partnerships and embark on training programs for younger generation to get them to actively involved in the efforts of preservation and continuity of local dances. It should not just depend on the aging artists.

This study hopes to advance another research related to this topic. Some suggestions are to examine the impact of modern technological advancements – social media/digital tourism on preservation of traditional culture, to undertake comparative studies between different indigenous groups in Borneo, Malaysia, or Southeast Asia to better understand the varying impacts of tourism on cultural sustainability, to investigate the potential for longitudinal studies to track the long-term effects of tourism on cultural practices and community dynamics and explore alternative methods of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge within the context of modern tourism practices.

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