Ethnicity and Tourism in Southeast Asia: 
Culture on the Move

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the relationship between ethnicity and tourism and explores the wider field of cultural identity. The concern is to pursue a conceptual exploration of ethnicity, locating this exercise within a comparative regional context and in relation to tourism development. It then adopts a more applied position with regard to Iban sacred cloths in Sarawak, Malaysia, which have been transformed by tourism and other processes of globalization. It argues for the importance of advocacy and persuading governments to take ethnic identities seriously, acknowledging the role that emblems of identity play in building self-confidence and self-respect and ensuring that traditional knowledge and skills are sustained and that they are deployed in the development of local livelihoods and identities.

Keywords: culture, ethnicity, tourism, advocacy, applied anthropology

Introduction

This paper emerges from a long engagement with the concepts of culture and ethnicity as part of a wider ranging comparative project on changing identities in Southeast Asia (King 2016). It uses sociological and anthropological studies of culture, nations and ethnicities to examine the ways in which identities are constructed, sustained and transformed in the context of touristic encounters. Then, in using a case study from Sarawak, Malaysia, it addresses problems to do with the consequences for identities of the transformation and use of items of material culture, emblematic of ethnic identity, in a globalizing touristic environment.
Culture and Identity

It is obvious that the concept of culture is closely implicated in the concept of identity (Kahn 1992, p. 160-163). Early on in anthropological debate Raoul Naroll defined ‘ethic units’ as ‘culture-bearing units’, and his early observation, though now dated, still holds (1964). Indeed, some social scientists talk of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘cultural identity’ in the same breath because both concepts comprise values, beliefs, ideas, actions, meanings and behavior. However, ethnicity has increasingly come to be seen as a special kind of identity attached to particular populations which command larger scale forms of allegiance and loyalty (Hitchcock and King 1997a, 1997b). Moreover, ethnicity is frequently seen as unifying and differentiating people at varying levels of contrast, and separating or distinguishing some from others by certain cultural criteria. Identities are therefore cultural and social constructions or inventions which require boundary formation, though always with the recognition that boundaries can be crossed and identities are ‘relational’ (Barth 1969; Boulanger 2009, p. 19).

A distinction must be made between ethnic and national identities, though they are closely interrelated. A national identity, usually constructed and promoted by a majority population, can also be considered as, in some sense, ‘ethnic’. But importantly the actions and policies of the state (usually controlled by a majority population) distinguish national identity from the identities of ‘ethnic’ minorities, and then attempt to translate those sub-national identities into a broader national identity. It is interesting that this subject has not received the attention it deserves in Southeast Asia given the legacy of a prominent social scientist of Southeast Asia, Benedict Anderson and his concept of the construction and ‘imagination’ of the nation (1991). In other words, though nation-states usually present identities as homogeneous, unified, bounded and fixed, or in Geertzian terms ‘primordial’ (Geertz 1963), they are in fact heterogeneous, fluid, changing, contingent, instrumental and used strategically and in role-playing (Dentan 1975, 1976; Leach 1954; Nagata 1974, 1975, 1979; and see Featherstone 2000; Kahn 1992, p. 170-171; Mackerras 2003, p. 12). They are always in the process of ‘becoming’, invariably located in a world of competing and interacting identities made more intense by the impacts of globalization and media technology, nation-building, and transnational movements and encounters, including those generated by tourism. In this connection Kessler has argued, following Hobsbawm (1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), that in a fast-changing and modernizing present, ‘tradition’
or ‘the past’, rather than ‘an unchanged residue... becomes a resource now capable of being consciously used to fashion and legitimate a form of life that exists only in a problematic and contingent present’ (1992, p. 134-135). Individuals can also carry multiple identities and utilize these as different situations and interactions demand (Dentan 1976, p. 78; King and Wilder 2003, p. 196-200; Nagata 1979). Hall also sets aside an ‘essentialist’, ‘naturalist’ concept of identity in favor of a ‘discursive’, ‘strategic’, ‘positional’ one. Cultural identities are therefore ‘never unified...never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting discourses, practices and positions’ (1900, 2000, p. 17). Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that however fluid and contingent ‘identities’ are, they take on a real and more solid and fixed quality, for most if not all of us. We desire to make them more ‘natural’ and ‘embedded’ than they actually are.

Classifications of people and the bases on which categories are formulated can be quite arbitrary and comprise ‘folk models’, ‘stereotypes’ or ‘typifications’ (Purushotam 1995, 1998, p. 19). These folk models are cultural short-hands to facilitate navigation through everyday life. However, things are not as simple as this and processes of cultural exchange, intermarriage, physical resettlement and absorption generate hybrid communities which partake of elements from more than one category or group or they generate multiple identities which co-exist, but which may be invoked according to circumstances.

Obviously those who study ethnicity and identity have to establish the criteria which can be used to unite and differentiate people and choose which make sense and are most appropriate in their analyses. These may or may not correspond with the criteria which the people under study themselves use and/or emphasize, the so-called ‘subjective’ dimension of identity (Nagata 1975, p. 3). But an outside observer in constructing classifications for comparative purposes might choose to emphasize certain criteria, say language, at the expense of others, in delimiting categories and groups (King 2001; King and Wilder 2003, p. 197; King and Wilder 1982).

**National Identities and Ethnicity**

National identities are constructed and presented by those in power in independent, politically and territorially defined units which we refer to as ‘states’. As Thongchai says,
It is generally supposed that a nation is a collective body to which individuals must belong... that... has essential traits commonly imbued in its members, who, moreover, have the same national interest. Patriotism, loyalty, and other affiliations in terms of ideas, sentiments, and practices appear to be natural relationships (1994, p. 1).

However, national identities are constructed because political elites engage in nation-building to promote collective solidarity and cohesion and in so doing keep themselves in power. Political leaders are usually assisted in this myth-making enterprise to ‘make’ citizens and ‘construct’ a national community by senior bureaucrats and intellectuals (which include historians, novelists, poets, painters, and musicians) (Barr and Skrbiš 2008, p. 41). Indeed, as a sense of national identity becomes embedded it is frequently ‘intellectuals’ and ‘cultural intermediaries’ who continuously contest, re-produce and re-negotiate national culture and convert cultural products into forms which can be disseminated and consumed by the citizenry (Zawawi Ibrahim 2009, p. 2-3). Therefore, in spite of the forces and pressures of globalization states are still vitally important units in the organization of people and space, and for nationalist historians like Constantino, in his reflections on Philippine history, nationalism provides ‘the only defense’ against the globalizing and homogenizing pressures emanating from the West (1998, p. 62-63). Territories, though in some sense constructed, are also real; lines drawn on maps and what is contained within those lines matter and have consequences for those who are considered on the one hand to belong to a particular state (as ‘citizens’ or ‘legal residents’) and those on the other who do not and who have to secure permission to reside or work there (Clammer 2002, p. 22). Territoriality is ‘the most concrete feature, the most solid foundation, literally and connotatively, of nationhood as a whole’ (Thongchai 1994, p. 17).

However difficult it might be in a mobile, globalized world, governments attempt to police and monitor their borders, allowing some people to enter under certain conditions and excluding or deporting others. The political leaders’ vision of what defines a state is backed by ‘agents of law enforcement’ who exercise control within a particular territory (Purushotam 1998, p. 5). The building of a nation-state with specific borders also requires the development of a physical infrastructure - housing, schools, industrial estates, and a
communication network along with national monuments and public buildings - which serves to underpin the process of constructing a sense of national identity among the citizenry (Barr and Skrbis 2008, p. 39-41). Interestingly in addition to the realities imposed by territorial boundaries, some observers have noted that there is a ‘realness’ even in the ‘imagined’ realms of national identity (Kahn 1998a, p. 17-26; 1998b). This concreteness is usually sought in the economic realm and in social class terms and, as Kahn has proposed, the attempts to reduce ethnic identity to social class relations, ‘must still take ethnic attachment as a given’ (1981,1992, p. 172; and see King 2008, p. 130). As we have also seen ethnic designations are often conflated with the concept of the nation so that the boundaries of the state are seen as coterminous with the ethnically-defined nation (Evans 1999a, p. 7; 1999b).

However, it is this very notion of a ‘nation’, a realization and acceptance of oneness, rather than that of an objectively defined and legally and territorially recognized ‘state’ which usually requires construction and continuous reinforcement through state action and its use of the media and national educational systems - in the creation of national symbols, myths, histories, events and institutions, and importantly in promoting tourism. A shared ancestry or common origin, designed to build a ‘sense of belonging’, is often claimed and associated with physical or territorial connectedness, cultural commonalities and various symbolic elements (Barr and Skrbis 2008, p. 2-3; Mackerras 2003, p. 11).

Colonial and indigenous legacies in the post-colonial states in Southeast Asia were subject to constant reformulation and alteration prior to independence; they were not handed down in any unchanged and pristine sense, and this process of connecting the past with the present and re-working the past in the present has intensified in the post-independence period. Anderson’s analysis of the construction or invention of nations with reference to Southeast Asian and other cases focused on the role of devices used by political elites to realize national consciousness; these included the print media, displays in museums, mapping and boundary-making, census-taking and ethnic categorization, and the adoption and development of a national language and educational system (1991). Nation-building projects in Southeast Asia and the ways in which political leaders have deployed their power and privilege to construct the nation in their image and have attempted to forge a national identity, and in the process legitimize their own political position, out of the cultural materials
and memories available to them have been examined in numerous studies (Brown 1994, 2000; Gomes 1994; Kahn 1998a, 1998b; Keyes 1987).

Tourism, Ethnicity and Cultural Change

As Wood has argued ‘Both ethnic and national identities will continue to be contested….and tourism will continue to be an important arena in which this contestation is played out’ (1997, p. 24). Furthermore, Bruner, in his study of what he terms the Balinese ‘borderzone’, suggests that international tourism and the encounters between the representatives of different cultures and identities comprise ‘an exchange system of vast proportions’ which is ‘characterized by a transfer of images, signs, symbols, power, money, goods, people, and services’ (1996, p. 157; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996, p. 14-16). Forshee too refers to ‘an embarrassment of riches’ in sites of international tourism in Southeast Asia (‘polyvocality’, ‘blurred genres’, ‘simulacra’, ‘dizzyingly multiple viewpoints’, ‘multinational capital’) (1999, p. 1). Tourism has been a major force in transforming cultures and identities, and in Southeast Asia cultural and ethnic tourism are major tourist attractions (Forshee, Fink and Cate 1999; Hitchcock, King and Parnwell 1993a, 1993b, 2009a, 2009b). The borderzones where representatives from different cultures meet and interact are sites of cultural creativity and innovation where ‘imagined’ communities are displayed and transformed.

Cultures are constructed and presented by those involved in promoting tourism and by governments and their agents seeking to attract tourists and their revenue. This has led some observers, anthropologists included, to argue that ‘touristic’ cultures become commoditized and inauthentic; even worse they suffer ‘cultural deterioration’ and ‘corrosion’ and their ways of life and identities are either seriously impaired or even destroyed (Hong 1985, p. 26, 84; Picard 1993, p. 71). It is certainly true that tourism can generate change in ‘other’ cultures but the view that this is invariably detrimental requires considerable qualification (King 1993; Cohen 1979).

On the contrary some studies have attempted to demonstrate that tourism may well have a positive impact on culture. From this perspective cultures are seen to be much more robust and responsive to external stimuli. This was McKean’s early view of cultural tourism in Bali when he argued that it provided funds which could be invested in the support and development of cultural activities,
organizations and training and it provided opportunities for the Balinese to
display their culture to others and develop pride in themselves, their identity
and their culture (1989 [1977]); a similar view has been presented by Hutajulu

These judgements are not only based on the supposition that culture is much
more resilient than some would believe, but that people can also segregate or
separate what is provided and performed for tourists (the ‘profane’ world of
the marketplace) and what is reserved for a domestic audience (the ‘sacred’
world of the deities and spirits). In other words local communities subject to
the ‘tourist gaze’ can actively use this attention to demonstrate the importance
of their culture and thereby strengthen their identity in interaction with the
state and more powerful neighbors.

The terms of the debate then shifted away from whether tourism had a positive
or negative impact on culture to examine cultural change in response to
tourism and the ways in which culture is subject to innovation, and ‘traditions’
are symbolically constructed, re-constructed, invented, manipulated and
contested (Adams 2006; Erb 2000; Picard 1993, 1996; Vickers 1989; Wood
1993; Yamashita 2003). Picard’s studies of Bali show how Balinese culture
has been ‘touristified’ and how what is created for the benefit of tourists
becomes incorporated as ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ into Balinese culture; in
this respect the distinction between culture performed for tourists and for the
Balinese themselves is therefore not sharply made and consistently applied
(1993, p. 73; Cohen 1988). As Bruner has also remarked ‘Balinese do paint
and dance for tourists, but at a later date many of these creative expressions
enter into Balinese social and cultural life’ (1996, p. 166). Indeed Bruner goes
so far as to state that ‘tourism is Balinese culture’ (1996, p. 177). What is
more some cultural productions and styles devised from Western aesthetes
and enthusiasts of Balinese culture like the German artist Walter Spies during
his sojourn on the island during the 1930s have been adopted by the Balinese
and incorporated into their ‘traditional’ culture (1996, p. 167; Hitchcock and
Norris 1995). Spies’s emphasis on magic and trance in Balinese performance
had a profound influence on Western scholarly and popular depictions of
Balinese culture which the Balinese themselves embraced (Latrell 1999, p.
235-246). Nevertheless, cultures are certainly ‘staged’ for tourists, and in
brief tourist encounters various elements of performance and ritual often
demand a simplified and abbreviated version, and handicrafts are also usually
miniaturized so that they can be easily carried home and fitted into a suitcase or back-pack (Causey 1997, 1998, 1999; Graburn 1976).

Moreover, in tourism encounters in Southeast Asia we must also take account of the different characteristics of the tourists (King 2009, 2015). A very large proportion of tourism flows into the region do not comprise North American, European, Australian and New Zealand tourists but are generated domestically and from within the Asian region. Initially Japanese, Hong Kong, Taiwanese and South Korean tourists visited the region; now larger numbers are coming from mainland China and the Indian subcontinent (Singh 2009). Therefore, the notion of Western visitors carrying Western values, attitudes and prejudices to far-flung places, undermining and commoditizing local identities and cultures, and drawing these communities into inappropriate and undesirable ways of life needs considerable qualification. Some tourist destinations in Southeast Asia are visited primarily by domestic tourists and other Asian tourists so that at least some of the cultural encounters in tourist zones are between those who share at least some common cultural characteristics. Even this statement requires some qualification when one witnesses interactions between urbanized Muslim Javanese from Jakarta and Christian Bataks and Torajas from upland areas of the outer islands performing versions of former pagan ceremonies (Adams 2006; Hutajulu 1995).

I have just juxtaposed Western and Asian tourists, but this distinction is entirely inadequate. Western tourists differ in their interests, motivations and attitudes just as do Asian tourists. The stereotypes of indigenous peoples and tourist sites which tourism creates apply in equal measure to the tourists themselves. For example, in an analysis of images of Vietnam and how tourist interest is generated, Biles, Lloyd and Logan differentiate between (1) the French ‘nostalgia for the former Indo-chinese empire’ and the ‘sense of pilgrimage’ that French tourists are encouraged to experience on their return to their former dependencies and colonies in the East; (2) the American promotion of tourism of the Vietnam war years for a ‘veteran’ market, encouraging the return of GIs to a still immediate and violent past and ‘the archaeological quest for the sites of wartime acts of heroism, of miracles and disasters’ and finally (3) the much more disparate Australian market comprising firstly war veterans for which Vietnam is a site of pilgrimage and nostalgia; secondly, the backpacker search for a relatively unexplored Asian destination at the pioneering end of the market, which reflects ‘the endless quest for the newest, the most remote,
the most exotic’; and finally, the ‘luxury’ tourism ventures which include the railway journey between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi and cruising along the coast of Vietnam (1999, p. 209-224).

Tourism, Identity and the State

In the interests of nation-building and securing political legitimacy but also to market their tourist assets and to deploy tourism as an important means of promoting economic growth governments and the agencies which they establish to organize and market tourism play a vital role in image construction. In Myanmar tourism has been carefully controlled and used to put the best possible light on what in the eyes of the regime has been achieved. Tourists are encouraged to gaze on a peaceful country exemplified by an ageless history of Buddhist temples in Bagan (Pagan) and the former royal capital of Mandalay; tourists are permitted to go to ‘sanitized’ spaces which are not part of the everyday experiences of ordinary Burmese (Fink 1999).

In Vietnam, in contrast to the nostalgic and exotic atmosphere presented by the international tour companies, the government has attempted to present a positive developmental view of its country, emerging from a closed economy to embrace the market, capitalism, modernization and economic growth and to counterbalance the popular perspectives of the country which emphasize domestic and French heritage and the American military encounter with the East (Biles, Lloyd and Logan 1999, p. 209-228).

The case of Indonesia is worth more extended consideration. The state presents images of its population as culturally diverse but invariably living in harmony in a unified nation. It was during Suharto’s New Order regime that large-scale tourism developed. The Javanese-dominated state constructed and deployed such concepts as ‘traditional values’, ‘ritual’, and ‘cultural inheritance’ to contribute to the maintenance of centralized political control. In its efforts to project Indonesian national identity based on ‘unity within diversity’, the government also set out to rationalize and simplify this diversity by constructing a relatively limited number of ‘regional’ or ‘provincial’ cultures. Ethnic classifications built upon the Dutch legacy of defining and categorizing Indonesia’s ‘traditional’ cultures and at the core of this was the Dutch focus on Javanese ritual display and the importance of cultural order derived from the creation of a Javanese cultural style by the court of the Sultan of Surakarta and confirmed as authentic Javanese tradition by Dutch scholars working at
the Java Institute. It is this Javanese identity and culture which was recovered by the New Order and presented as authentically Javanese (Pemberton 1994).

One expression of this post-independence national-cultural discourse was the construction of Taman Mini ‘Indah Indonesia’ or the ‘Beautiful Indonesia’-in-Miniature Park, commissioned by former President Suharto’s wife, Ibu Tien Suharto, opened in 1975 (Hitchcock 1997, p. 227-235). A theme park on the outskirts of Jakarta, it combined recreational and leisure facilities, a lake with islands which represented the Indonesian archipelago, reconstructed ‘ancient monuments’ harking back to Indonesia’s glorious past, and 26 display houses in different architectural styles emblematic of the 26 provinces of the country and their assigned regional culture (Pemberton 1994, p. 152-161). For the Indonesian nation-state regional cultures rather than the culture of particular ethnic groups were the constituent diversities in an overall Javanese-centered cultural unity. The regional cultures were themselves artefacts of nation-building, and though drawn from local communities they were composed of carefully sifted cultural elements which emphasized overt or performed culture (costume, dance, music, ritual, performance, material culture). In a controlled and ordered space, the Indonesian nation, its focal points, history and diversity have been constructed and displayed as a ‘cultural dreamland’ (Hitchcock 1997, p. 234; Pemberton 1994, p. 318).

Two of the major sites of New Order tourism development were beyond the Muslim heartland of Java, namely the Hinduized Balinese and ‘the tribal animists’ of Torajaland in Sulawesi (King 2009, p. 56-61). One of the best examples of this political dimension of image-making and identity construction is the expansion of tourism from the 1970s into the Toraja area of South Sulawesi (Crystal 1989 [1977]; Volkman 1984, 1985, 1990). International tourists in the first instance from continental Europe and Australia increased rapidly in numbers and Torajaland began to appear in tourist guidebooks and magazines and on film and television (King 2009, p. 60). The region was given an enormous boost from the funds sent back to the homeland by migrant Toraja laborers, and with the expansion of both international and domestic tourism, and the development of transport, tourist accommodation and other infrastructure the local economy grew rapidly. Tourism and economic growth generated a process of cultural invention and innovation which had implications for Toraja identity, and tourism moved rapidly from being small-scale ethnic tourism to a mass or charter cultural tourism (Adams 1984 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2006; Yamashita 1994, 2003). The major spectacle
which tourists came to see were the dramatic mortuary rituals in which large numbers of animals were sacrificed in public displays of prestige and wealth. In spite of the considerable social, economic and cultural changes and the fact that most Toraja were Christians, Torajaland was promoted both by the Indonesian government and private tourism businesses as an ‘exotic’ and ‘primitive’ location, an opportunity to experience something very different and distinctive. Funeral rites along with ancestral effigies (tautau) displayed in rock shelters, and the striking architecture and symbolic decoration of ancestral houses came to define in an overt way the touristic ethnic identity of the Toraja to the Indonesian government, Indonesians and an international audience (King 2009, p. 59; Adams 1997a, p. 159).

As Adams demonstrates, the Toraja were by no means passive agents in encounters with outsiders. Instead they engaged in a creative process of reconfiguring externally generated images of them ‘in order to negotiate a better position for themselves in the Indonesian hierarchy of ethnic groups’ (1999, p. 249-250, p. 260). This was particularly noticeable in their relations with the neighboring lowland Muslim Buginese and Makassarese who resented the national and international attention given to the Toraja, in their eyes an unsophisticated upland people (Adams 1997a, p. 174). Adams also argues that the staging of ritual performances for tourists does not necessarily result in Toraja ceremonies losing their local meaning. They may take on new meanings, but the Toraja mortuary rituals ‘continue to carry tremendous cultural significance’ in the context of values to do with status, responsibilities to senior members of the family, markers of identity and cultural position within and beyond Indonesia (1999, p. 251-257).

In the case of Bali similar processes were at work, but, given that the Balinese had been exposed to tourism over a considerably longer period of time, their culture has been more thoroughly ‘touristified’ in comparison with the Toraja. However, in both cases ‘culture’ in its relationship to the demands of tourism has become objectified and certain overt cultural elements, particularly ritual performances, dance and material culture, have been used in constructing identities. For Bali it was the active, visual aspects of Hinduism which were seized upon by the Dutch in its policy of ‘Balinization’; these were continued by the post-colonial government and became the ‘regional culture’ of Bali (Howe 2005). But for Picard it is not so much a question of how tourism has ‘impacted’ on culture and with what results, but how Balinese culture has been shaped and transformed by tourism from within; this entails that
the boundaries between Balinese culture and those influences which emanate from outside, and between ‘culture’ and ‘tourism’ are blurred (1997, p. 183; Vickers 1989).

Following independence the Indonesian political elite commenced the task of constructing an Indonesian nation, and although a secular state, one of its guiding principles was that all Indonesians must believe ‘in one God’. ‘Hindu Balinese Religion’ was given presidential support in 1958 and finally received official government recognition in 1965 as agama Hindu (Hindu religion) (Picard 1997, p. 194-195). Hinduism then had to be codified and formalized and in its doctrinal form differed considerably from what was practiced in house yards and village temples. As in other parts of Indonesia the New Order’s ambitions to promote economic growth and development led to a surge in tourism from the early 1970s, and it was also seen as part of the government’s efforts to construct a national identity based on unity in diversity. Bali was an Indonesian ‘showcase’ and it saw further development in the 1980s with the opening of the airport in Den Pasar to international airlines and in the 1990s with vigorous advertising campaigns to attract wealthy foreign package tourists to luxury hotels (Picard 1993, p. 79-81). Despite anxieties that Balinese culture would be overwhelmed and commoditized, the general view both within and outside Bali was that the Balinese were experiencing a cultural renaissance (1993, p. 88-89).

The Indonesian slogan of ‘unity in diversity’ is a well-known theme in Southeast Asian political discourse. Governments and tourism companies also usually play on the exotic, romantic and colorful dimensions of particular tourist destinations. Tourists are often unwilling to pay to gaze on and photograph the ordinary and the everyday, or that which is no different or little different from what they can see back home; cultures under threat and in the process of losing their distinctiveness to become pale imitations of modern, urbanized societies are not what tourists search for. Nor do they want to sit in Bangkok traffic jams, unless pollu-tours take over from eco-tours (Cate 1999, p. 41). Indeed, the promotion of tourism in Southeast Asia has served to resurrect ‘Orientalist’ imaginings and to create or rather re-create ‘the primitive’, ‘the native’, the ‘exotic’ whether it be the head-hunting Dayak of Borneo (Mayer 1999; and see King 1994), the animal-sacrificing Toraja of Sulawesi (Adams 1999) or the animist Toba Batak descended from cannibals (Causey 1997, 1998, 1999).
Because they are in positions of power and influence the representatives of the state and the government agencies charged with tourism policy-making and promotion are able to construct and disseminate authoritative images of the nation and its citizens for an international tourist audience. Wood has stated forcefully that ‘The relationship between tourism and ethnicity is mediated by various institutions, but none more important than the state’ (1997, p. 2). But state agencies, though very significant, are not the only image-makers and there is a host of others which present and indeed construct cultures and identities – tourist guides and agents, interpreters, private promoters, travel companies, hoteliers and other entrepreneurs, academic researchers, and travel writers. But even in closely controlled states local people usually attempt to take advantage of any opportunities presented to them to promote their vision of their identity. Tourism has become implicated in the cultural politics of Southeast Asia in the attempts by political leaders to present preferred images of their nation-state to their own citizens, to neighboring states, and to an international audience. As Wood reminds us the images constructed for the tourism market are intimately related to the politics of identity (1993, p. 60-61).

**Malaysian Iban and Emblems of Ethnicity: Advocacy, Material Culture and Tourism**

Let us now turn to the relationship between items of material culture, identity, applied anthropology and tourism in a case study of the Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia. It was Nelson Graburn’s edited book on ethnic and tourist arts (1976) which demonstrated that cultural productions designed and produced for the tourist market were not merely commercial and commodified items but carried meanings and symbols to do with identities and representations; and as Adams has argued in her work on tourism among the Toraja ‘souvenirs and commodified arts/handicrafts are directly and indirectly tied to notions of ethnicity, gender, authenticity, and cultural heritage’ (1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2006, 2009, p. 70; Cohen 2000; Hitchcock and Teague 2000). But as she also demonstrates they are dynamic cultural productions generated by and incorporated into an increasingly globalized, de-territorialized and hybridized world (Causey 1997, 1998, 1999; Hutajulu 1995).
Adams’s observations on Torajan tourist-oriented material culture capture precisely the case of the Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia, and the transformations of their tie-dyed (ikat or kebat in Iban) textiles into globalized objects of fashion, tourist souvenirs and emblems of Iban identity. Handicrafts and souvenirs, where they are derived from long-established templates which have strong social and religious meanings, like Iban sacred cloths (pua’ kumbu’) can become involved in the politics of culture and debates about cultural authenticity, ethnic identity and indigenous heritage.

Yet how do those who wish to protect and conserve a significant cultural production – in this case a prominent element within Iban material or tangible heritage, but embodying indigenous knowledge, meanings and skills – interact with the demands of the tourist industry and the compulsion to transform these textiles into commodities for the marketplace? (Berma 1996). The meanings and aesthetic qualities of ritual cloths have been the subject of intense debate and attention during the past decade or so (Gavin 2003, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2015; Heppell 2006a, 2006b, 2013, 2014; Sather 2006; Wadley 2006).

**Iban Identity**

In a recent discussion of the ‘ethnic labels’: ‘Iban’, ‘Ibanic’, ‘Ketungau’, ‘Desa’, ‘Kantu’, ‘Mualang’, ‘Banjur’, Sebaru’ and ‘Bugau’, deployed in various ways to refer to segments of a culturally and historically related complex of peoples in West and North-west Borneo, Gavin confirms that modes of ethnic affiliation and processes of identification are based on multiple and context-generated ‘layers’ of representation and meaning (2012, p. 107; King 2001; Lim 2001; Wadley 2000). These identities are sometimes contested, primarily in the arena of local politics and status competition, and are contingent and contradictory. Gavin also argues that woven textile styles, or ‘stylistic markers’, specifically those of *ikat*-patterned women’s skirts (*kain kebat*) ‘can be a clear, almost foolproof indicator of past ethnic affiliations’ (Gavin 2003, 2012, p. 107, 109). However, the difficulties of determining ethnic identity are complicated because textiles are traded, gifted, exchanged and they travel, and people too move, migrate, intermarry, adapt, adopt, copy and absorb, not only with regard to items of material culture like woven cloths but also to language, custom and behavior.
Although the origins of the term ‘Iban’ have been subject to dispute and up to about 40 or so years ago competed with the alternative ethnic label ‘Sea Dayak’, at least among some sub-groups, ‘Iban’ as an ethnic label, meaning in the Iban language ‘person’, ‘human being’, or ‘layperson’, has become increasingly accepted and fixed in popular and scholarly literature (Gavin 2012, p. 98; Lim 2001; Sather 2004, p. 623-626). Moreover, the use of the term ‘Ibanic’, primarily used to refer to a linguistic category and one which then became increasingly applied to a collection of separately named groups (not only linguistically, but also culturally and historically related to the Iban) has engendered even more controversy (Gavin 2012, p. 101-102).

The distinctive and exquisite ikat-textiles woven by the Iban and related groups have therefore served and continue to serve as significant ethnic markers. However, as Gavin has noted, in her research in West Kalimantan from 2005 to 2009, primarily among groups there related to the Iban, these textiles have ‘appeared in great numbers on the international art market in the last ten to fifteen years and the only textiles left today are fragments or poor quality specimens that are of no interest to collectors’ (2012, p. 104). Iban textiles in various forms (table-cloths, runners, knapkins, towels, place-mats, men’s ties, shirts), and motifs, or variations of motifs, designs or patterns, used on t-shirts, and other tourist items, are major commodities for sale in such tourism sites as the Main Bazaar in Kuching and in souvenir shops and galleries in towns and in tourist longhouses in Sarawak. These cultural constructions are part of wider processes of touristification among the Iban of Sarawak and the development of longhouse tourism in the Skrang, Lemanak, Engkari and Ulu Ai regions (Kruse 2003; Winzeler 2011, p. 229-236; Yea 2002, p. 73-194; Zeppel 1995, 1997, p. 119-140). Indeed, Tan Ghee Gay has argued, in his analysis of visual representations among the Iban (in photography and film; postcards; tourist promotional literature; newspapers and magazines; travel, popular and scholarly books; television; the internet) which continue to promote stereotyped and exotic images of otherness, noble savages, and unsullied upriver paradises (communal longhouses, feathered head-dresses, tattoos, blowpipes, head-hunting swords, war-dances, cock-fighting, and dancing maidens bedecked with beads, silver jewelry, and woven skirts), that Iban culture, like that of the famous example of the Balinese, is becoming increasingly ‘touristified’ (2009, p. 275-286).
Advocacy and Practice

A current research project on *pua kumbu* is being undertaken at the University of Malaya through Dr Welyne Jeffrey Jehom of the Gender Studies Programme (GSP), and Professor Harold Thwaites of the Centre for Creative Content and Digital Innovation (CCCDI), along with a large number of researchers, including external advisors, technical experts and Iban weavers from Rumah Garie in Sarawak. The project combines detailed academic research with the practical objective of addressing poverty among rural Iban; it is investigating textile history; the social and cultural context of textile production; the knowledge, skills, expertise and creativity embodied in Iban cloths; and the market potential, value chains and stakeholders involved. The action or practical research involves the implementation of an economic program to develop a viable and sustainable livelihood for Iban women in producing textiles for sale, and to do this through the use of traditional weaving methods and natural dyes. In other words, the emphasis is not on the production of relatively low cost tourist souvenirs as such, but on a more upmarket, personalized niche product.

To achieve high impact results from this research a ‘Textile Tales of Pua Kumbu Polysensory Intermedia Exhibition’ was organized at the University of Malaya Art Gallery (13 June-17 July, 2015). A special opening ceremony was presided over by the Malaysian Minister of Tourism and Culture (CCCDI, 2015). There is enormous interest in Iban textiles and their production has proved to be much more resilient in Sarawak than in Kalimantan. This has been in no small part due to the interest and support of prominent Iban politicians and businesspeople and a wide range of other patrons of the arts in the state capital Kuching to serve the tourist market, and, in a more commercially oriented way of Chinese entrepreneurs who have developed new forms, designs and styles for the international fashion industry.

What is important in a Malaysian context with regard to this research project is the role not just of action research but also anthropological advocacy. In this connection UNESCO (2015) compiles a Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Iban *pua’kumbu* and the wider range of woven cloths provide an ideal opportunity for Malaysia to apply for inscription to demonstrate that these textiles are the product of a long-established tradition and part of a complex of beliefs, rituals and skills residing within the sphere.
of women’s activities. Iban textiles are unique and the associated skills and knowledge are now only active in Malaysia. They also raise complex issues, especially when they are marketed for tourism and fashion purposes, of not only what constitutes indigenous heritage, but also how intellectual or cultural property rights are recognized and protected, and how ethnic identity is expressed.

**Conclusions**

Unless artistic skills and material culture as an expression of a non-Western, pagan heritage continue to be valued, then they are likely to disappear as younger generations seek modernity, education and new urban lifestyles. However, tourism in spite of its impulse to commoditize and stage culture can also help provide the resources and interest to sustain some skills and knowledge, and elements of material culture. Once sustained then a range of patrons may enter the field, often to realize profit, but to encourage and support what they consider to be indigenous heritage.

Among the Iban the skills and knowledge of *ikat*-weaving were in danger of disappearing had it not been for influential and wealthy Iban patrons who provided women weavers with the financial support, and access to materials and to markets, including tourist markets. And, although tourism also acted to simplify and modernize methods, materials, designs and forms, it nevertheless served to keep skills and knowledge alive. These expressions of material culture, whether sophisticated and closer to ‘traditional’ forms or simplified and directed to mass tourist markets, also serve to express ethnic identity. Moreover, through action research and advocacy in Malaysia perhaps the opportunity to secure recognition for Iban *pua’ kumbu’* as national heritage and as part of a wider Malaysian identity may eventually secure a larger symbolic and emblematic role for these woven textiles, rather than merely serving the tourist and fashion market.

**Notes**

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