Abstract: In the wake of Georgetown’s inscription as a World Heritage Site in 2008, this study examines the Indian Muslim community’s construction and presentation of its culture and ethnic identity, under the aegis of the Indian Muslim Community Organization (iMcom) and the Indian Muslim Cultural Heritage Celebrations (IMCHC), in conjunction with the broader Georgetown Festival and Penang Heritage Day. The study gives the historical context of Indian Muslims in Malaysia before exploring the role of Kapitan Keling Mosque as the functional locus for the Indian Muslim community’s festival activities, and how this has shaped the material culture and practices therein offered up for the ‘tourist gaze’. The findings show that the selected cultural heritage of ethnic Indian Muslims, especially cuisine, is both a popular and lucrative tourist attraction, and something the community as a whole values and wishes to preserve. The IMCHC was observed to be a success both in terms of tourism development and, as far as was observed, its aims under iMcom to unite the community into concerted efforts to preserve and value their ethnic and cultural heritage. The study concludes with a brief discussion of iMcom as an agent in the construction and presentation of Indian Muslim culture for both tourist and internal consumption, and some recommended directions for further study.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Tourism, Ethnic Identity, Indian Muslim Community

Introduction

Nicknamed the “Pearl of the Orient”, Penang has attracted large numbers of domestic and foreign tourists ever since the colonial era. Between 1990 and 2013, Penang received over 90.14 million visitors, with an annual average
of 3.92 million visitors (Shida Irwana et al. 2015). Georgetown, Penang’s capital, is a vibrant, multicultural city whose character is in part defined by its demographic variety, amongst which can be counted a significant Indian Muslim community.

The issue of Indian Muslim identity within and as a part of Penang is an ongoing dilemma for this community. This dilemma is often characterized as a delicate balancing act between two sides of a dual identity, these being Malay Muslim and Indian Muslim (Erni 2010; Nagata 1993). In accordance with Malaysia’s constitution, Indian Muslims should assimilate themselves into Malay culture. However, not all Indian Muslims wish to be identified as Malays, preferring to retain their own cultural identity and practices. This has given rise to movements within the Indian Muslim community to revive and preserve ‘lost’ cultural practices that they claim as their ethnic heritage (respondent interviews).

Ethnic identity is recognized as a major theme in tourism development, especially within cultural heritage tourism (Grünewald 2003; BaiZhihong 2007). In this context, ethnic identity recapitulates notions of common origin, history, culture and race, codifying them as a set of assets that can function both as a tourism product and as a cultural binding agent for a community. This study explores how the perceived ethnic identity of Indian Muslims is being utilized by members of the community and the Indian Muslim Community Organization (iMcom) as not only a basis for tourism development, but also a rubric under which to strengthen and maintain their culture and its heritage.

**Research Methodology**

This research focused on Indian Muslims living in Penang, particularly in the city of Georgetown. The data were drawn from a 12 month period of fieldwork, conducted between 2012 – 2013. The fieldwork involved active participation, observation, in-depth interviews, informal interviews and many sessions of speaking informally with tourists. Using a loosely structured questionnaire, 25 informants were identified and interviewed, including Indian Muslim community leaders such as the Chairman of Kapitan Keling Mosque and the president of iMcom. Interviews were also conducted with a tourism officer from Georgetown World Heritage Incorporated, and volunteers from both Kapitan Keling mosque and iMcom. The iMcom members interviewed
were aged between 18 and 35 years old. They also included members of the organizing committee for the Indian Muslim Cultural Heritage Celebration (IMCHC). IMCHC is an Indian Muslim festival that is organized annually in conjunction with Penang Heritage Day. The research set out to address the following questions: a) Precisely which products of Indian Muslim culture are selected for the tourist gaze and why? b) To what extent is ethnic identity being deployed to construct ethnic tourism products? c) What is the role of Kapitan Keling Mosque in the construction of such products and Indian Muslims’ tourist image?

The process of establishing rapport began in mid 2012 through iMcom. We became acquainted with a young Indian Muslim member of iMcom through the organization’s official website. Contact with other potential informants was then made with her assistance. After establishing a relationship with the organization, we were often invited to attend programs organized by it, including Indian Muslim wedding ceremonies and the World Heritage Cultural Celebration in 2012. The participant observation segment of the research was undertaken during various programs and ceremonies that we attended, with a view to understanding how the material culture of Indian Muslims in Penang was being selected to represent ethnic identity for the ‘tourist gaze’. We not only participated in the festival and its program, but also served as its secretariat, in addition to joining guided tours with other tourists.

A total of 20 tourists were selected for in-depth interviews to collect data on tourist motivation and experience. This group consisted of 8 domestic tourists and 12 international tourists. International tourists came from various countries including Korea, Brunei, India, Taiwan, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, England, Spain and Sweden. The majority were aged 17 - 31 years old. Tourists were asked about the nature and extent of their participation in the festival, their resulting personal experiences, reflections and initial motivations. A majority disclosed that they decided to visit Penang by virtue of its status as a new World Heritage site. They accessed information on Penang island through tour agents, tour guides, pamphlets or websites. Most of the tourists were interviewed within the UNESCO heritage zone, mostly around the mosque and in the city center of Georgetown.

Most of our Indian Muslim informants spoke the national language of Malay, but we did encounter some difficulties interviewing the older generation,
whom we assumed would be able to help us construct a picture of the scope and dynamic of the cultural changes they had experienced. We found that most of the older generation spoke Tamil and could not communicate in Malay. Initially we wanted to use translators in the form of willing family members, but some refused to be interviewed as they were embarrassed to admit that they could not speak Malay. For this reason, we had to cancel several interviews as full consent was not granted. Research has shown that only the older generation still retain Tamil as their first language, or, depending on their descent, Urdu, Bengali or Hindustani. Today, most Indian Muslim youth prefer to speak Malay (Pillai 2015). In this research, we decided to focus on respondents who were generally members of the younger generation of Indian Muslims.

**Key Concepts**

**Ethnic Identity, Heritage and Ethnic Tourism**

Ethnicity is an important subject in Tourism Studies as it permeates various aspects of the tourism industry. The subject is a complex one however, due to its imbrication with the perplexities of political and social structure. Ethnic identity is a frame within which individuals identify, consciously or unconsciously, others with whom they perceive they share a common bond, by virtue of shared traditions, values, and beliefs (Helms 1994). In Tourism Studies, the term ‘ethnic tourism’ was first used by Smith (1977, p. 4), who defined it as a form of tourism that was “marketed to the public in terms of the unique tradition and customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples”. Ethnic tourism activities include visiting ethnic villages, minority homes and ethnic theme parks, participation in ethnic events and festivals, watching traditional dances or ceremonies, and shopping for ethnic handicrafts and souvenirs (Yang, Wall and Smith 2008).

There are various approaches used by scholars to interrogate the concept of ethnicity in tourism. For example, Graburn (1976) discusses the relationships between identity, tourism and ethnic art. Graburn views ethnicity as a constructed identity in a pluralized world where communication, education, and travel are understood as fundamental for gaining knowledge of and access to others. He argues that the revival or reinforcement of certain traditions in a given society can strengthen the sense of ethnic identity for that community, especially at times when it perceives itself to be under threat. This phenomenon
is often tied to the construction and celebration of a ‘golden age’ or glorious past that has been lost (Grunewald 2006). This relates to arguments made by MacCannell (1992) on the concept of ‘constructed ethnicity’, namely ‘made-for-tourist identities’ that emerge as a strategy to insulate a society from intrusion or influence by a cultural ‘other’. The construction of identity always begins with the ‘gaze of the other’, used as a point of comparative reference (Lanfant 1995).

For other scholars, ethnic tourism can be a platform for an ethnic group to “broadcast itself, its history and its culture” (MacCannell 1973) and can assist in the preservation of threatened minority heritage and ethnic revitalization (Henderson 2003). Ethnic tourism is also understood as a tool for promoting self-awareness and pride among local people and strengthening local identity.

In contemporary society, heritage is often treated as a commodity, especially in tourism (Graham et al. 2000). However, some argue that heritage tourism is different from ethnic tourism particularly in the nature and direction of the tourist gaze. In heritage tourism the latter is focused more on place, history and custom, rather than on people and ‘exotic bodies’ (Berkin 2009). Scholars have acknowledged the difficulties in defining the concept of heritage, as in the work of Hitchcock and King (2003). They define heritage as referring primarily to “tangible and concrete elements of the past which are presented and re-presented in the present” (2003, p. 1). They argue that this definition refers not only to material culture but also to ‘traditional’ ways of life. Heritage tourism involves a reconstruction of certain aspects of a common tradition and history that defines a region, event, or place and it is argued that heritage tourism can incorporate ethnic tourism but not the other way round (Berkin 2009). The theoretical distinction between heritage and ethnic tourism is critical as it represent different kinds of power relationships especially in the aspect of who exercises control over how culture is being presented for tourist gaze (Poria et al. 2003). Although both heritage and ethnic tourism involve the commodification of culture, minority communities in ethnic tourism are perceived to have less control over their presentation to tourists (Boyd 2000; Foster 2013). In ethnic tourism, agents with administrative power and commercial interests naturally wield profound influence over the process of constructing cultural and ethnically themed tourist products that further their vested interests (Chiao 2014).
The literature on ethnicity and tourism has not ignored the politics of ethnicity construction. Wood (1997) for example, maintains that there are multiple institutions mediating the relationship between tourism and ethnicity, and the state tends to have more authority in identifying the kind of heritage to be constructed. Picard and Wood (1997) argue that ethnic identities are commodified through a process of creation, rearrangement, and packaging for tourism development in the local and international markets. The state brings tourism and ethnicity together precisely because through tourism policies and promotional activities, identities can be created, changed, and presented to the nation and to the outside world (Hitchcock and King 2003). In the literature on ethnic tourism in Southeast Asia, ethnicity is not viewed in terms of bounded entities and places, but as a set of social relationships and processes within identity and culture are constantly created and recreated (see Sofield 2001). In Southeast Asia, emphasis is often placed on the exotic, such as striking body decoration, spectacular funeral rituals and institutions such as headhunting.

In the case of Malaysia, the work of Nigel Worden (2001) provides evidence of the state’s efforts to construct a national Malay-focused identity as a tool for the development of tourism. He describes how Melaka is represented as a national symbol of Malaysia, that particularly symbolizes the heritage of Malay Muslims. However, the effort to consolidate Melaka as the prime locus of national identity faced challenges, due to the disappearance of material culture and buildings connected with Malay and Islamic identity (see also Lai and Ooi 2015).

In this paper, I argue that the Indian Muslim community in Penang are fully engaging in the revival and construction of their history and cultural heritage, not only with a view to tourism development, but as a means of rallying younger generations who are less invested in their traditional ethnic identity, or even reject it. The opportunities provided by the state and local tourism agencies to present Indian Muslim cultural heritage in the Georgetown Festival has been utilized by iMcom to these ends.

**Indian Muslims and Ethnic Identity in Penang**

Most historians agree that a community of Indian Muslims were present in Penang prior to the arrival of the British, perhaps as early as 1770 (Wan Kamal 2012; Muhammad Faisal and Zamri 2008). Trade relations were in
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place between India and Malaya at the beginning of the 17th century, in which Indian Muslim traders played a role (Nin 1993; Wan Kamal 2012). The Indian Muslim contributions to Malaya’s economic development grew in correspondence with the size of their community. They also built mosques and madrassah (religious schools) in various parts of the country (see Pillai 1995).

Seeni (2001) gives a useful overview of the history of Indian Muslims in Malaysia in his book *Indian Muslims in Penang: Role and Contributions*. He explains that prior to 1786, Indian Muslims were engaging in trade from Kuala Kedah to the city of Georgetown. In Georgetown alone, a community of more than 1,000 Indian Muslim traders resided. Many historians conclude that Indian Muslim traders came primarily from Bengal, Golkonda, Coromandel and Gujarat. They married local Malays and adopted the practices of Malay Muslims (Seeni 2001). The Malay term term ‘Keling’ means ‘dealer from South India’ (Wan Kamal 2012).

It is claimed that the first Indian Muslim community in Penang was established by Kader Mydin Merican, or Cauder Moheedin, who migrated to Penang with his mother and sister (Merican 2010). 11-year-old Kader left the village of Sulthan Paranggi with his mother and younger brother to begin a new life in Penang, where the family started a small business. As their fortunes improved, the family also travelled to Kedah, Aceh, and other ports in the region. According to Wan (2012), Cauder Merican Noordin Muhammad Moheedin developed the area around Georgetown even before Francis Light landed on Penang. Kader Mydin Merican had become a very successful textile entrepreneur and was the richest man in Penang. Given his position, the British government appointed him as the first leader of the Indian Muslim community in Penang, conferring upon him the title ‘Kapitan Keling’.

A 2010 census conducted by the Department of Statistics shows that the Indian Muslim population has increased from 69,000 in 2000 to 78,702 in 2010, of which 42,475 were male and 36,227 were female (Wan Kamal 2012). The concentration of Muslim Indians in cities is closely linked to the socio-economic opportunities that are available there.

The Indian Muslim community in Malaysia consists of various small groups originating from India (Seeni 2001). Among the groups that exist in Penang are the Kerala Muslims, Malabar Muslims, Bengali Muslims, Gujerati
Muslims, Thenkasi Muslims and Tamilnadu. In Malaysia, all these groups are referred to ethnically as Tamil Muslims, with the term *mamak*. However, the longstanding migration of Indian Muslims to Malaysia has led to a process of cultural assimilation through marriage. Many wish to be recognized as *jawiperanakan*, meaning those who fully practice Malay culture and speak Bahasa Malaysia. The process of assimilation with the local Malay community has a significant social impact, especially among the younger generation who experience the dilemma of choosing a cultural identity. Subsequently, Indian Muslims in Malaysia are often described as having ‘overlapping identities’ (Saidatulakmal 2010; Nagata 1993). They can be recognized as Indians or Malays, and their status is further complicated by differences in intra-Indian culture, language and social background. Indian Muslim identity is therefore constantly in flux (Nagata 1993).

According to Wazir (2015), the *jawiperanakan* can be distinguished from the *mamak* through the use of certain names, and differences in language use. She argues that the *mamak* are a mixture of ethnic Malays and southern Indians, and they speak Malay and Tamil besides English. The *jawiperanakan* community are understood to be a hybrid of Malay and Indian extraction, in addition to Arab, Punjabi, Bengali, Turkish, Persian and Afghani Gujerati. Their society was formed in the British Malaya era, when Indian merchants married local Malay women. Their wealth and its accompanying status helped develop Penang during the 1740s. The *jawiperanakan* have prospered in Malaysia due to the growth of trade in spices, fruits, textiles, coal, rice, onions and gold. They are concentrated in coastal areas such as Tanjung Tokong, Lebuh Acheh, Jalan Transfer, Jalan Argyll, Jalan Kapitan Keling, Lebuh Melayu and Lebuh Armenian.

There are, then, a variety of categories and groups that Indian Muslims in Malaysia can fit into. The *jawiperanakan* embraced Malay culture and today practice it fully, whilst other groups still cling to their Indian cultural identity. Some wish to leave behind their Indian Muslim identity altogether. Saidatulakmal (2010) undertakes a survey of Indian Muslims in Penang and their preferred ethnic identity in which 80 percent experienced some form of dilemma, which resulted in them not choosing Indian Muslim identity. This phenomenon has raised concern especially among the older generations of Indian Muslims about the longevity of their cultural heritage. Many wish to enhance the education of young people about their ancestry and cultural
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heritage. In line with these efforts, many young Indian Muslims have taken up the opportunity provided by the Penang State Government to develop heritage tourism, through the organization of the Indian Muslim Cultural and Heritage Celebration (IMCHC).

The Tourism Development Context: Penang Island

Penang’s charisma as a tourist destination is often characterized as a blend of the historical and modern that is reflected not only in its physical space and material culture, but also the ethnic variety in its population. Portrayed as one of the most famous islands in Southeast Asia, Penang is celebrated for its rich heritage, culture and cuisine, its beautiful beaches and other natural attractions, and its multicultural society formed principally of Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. Penang was formally inscribed, together with Melaka, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on 7th July 2008. Since inscription, Penang has become increasingly popular as a travel destination, particularly after Georgetown Festival was first held in 2009. The festival is employed by the State Government as an opportunity to promote and preserve the city’s heritage in both its tangible and intangible forms.

Georgetown Festival is an annual, month-long celebration of the city’s inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List, and has become one of the most anticipated events in Asia. There are 147 programmes organized throughout the event consisting of art exhibitions, street performances and art all around Georgetown, celebrating the culture of the Malays, Indians, Chinese and the Indian Muslim community. The Georgetown Festival is seen as the best platform for the Penang State Government in promoting the cultural heritage of Penang and boosting its tourism industry. In 2009, Penang’s contribution to the Malaysian tourist industry was the third highest in the country with nearly six million tourist arrivals. Between January and June 2010, Penang recorded a 40 percent increase in the number of international tourist arrivals (Tourism Statistics 2010). Penang was visited by 405,932 tourists in 2010, as compared to 244,146 in the same period the year before. Of the tourist arrivals, Indonesians topped the list at over 92,000, followed by Singaporeans (51,392), China (16,000), Australia, Japan, Latin America and India (12,000 each), United States (10,000) and Middle East countries (1,360).
There are various important state government agencies and NGOs responsible for the development of tourism in Penang. Penang Global Tourism for example is the state tourism bureau set up to collaborate with key tourism players in promoting the state tourism industry. The Georgetown World Heritage Incorporated parties (GTWHI), formerly known as the Heritage Centre of Penang, organize Georgetown Festival each year. The main role of the World Heritage Office in Georgetown is to monitor and safeguard each important site, conduct research, training and education programs for stakeholders, and to promote the sites. Another important NGO group in the local tourism industry is The Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) which was established in 1986 to promote the conservation of Penang’s heritage and historical buildings.

iMcom itself is an NGO whose aim is to gather and coordinate the history of the Indian Muslim community and to increase public awareness about Indian Muslim cultural heritage. The association established its official website in 2008 (www.indiamuslim.com.my). In 2012, 290 members throughout the country have signed up and volunteer numbers have reached more than 1,000 people.

**Indian Muslim Community and Tourism Activities**

In a recent survey by the Muslim Travel Shopping Index (2015), Kuala Lumpur and Penang were in the Top 10 preferred destinations for Muslim tourists worldwide. In Malaysian tourism, Penang is promoted in terms of its heritage, culture and the diverse cuisines of its different ethnic groups. The variety of street food particularly has become one of the main attractions for tourists (Pillai 1995). Penang’s cuisine is generally recognized as comprising five components, namely Malay, Indian Muslim, Chinese and Peranakan Chinese, usually referred to as Baba and Nyonya.

In Penang, the primary Indian Muslim contribution to tourism is its cuisine, especially the famous dishes *nasi kandar* and *pasembur*. *Nasi kandar* is particularly synonymous with Penang. It consists of rice served with different types of curries and side dishes which include fish, chicken, squid, prawns and beef. The Penang tourist brochure describes *nasi kandar* as an example of Indian Muslim cuisine that is part of the city’s cultural heritage, and promotes many specific restaurants. One common characteristic of these *nasi kandar* restaurants is that most have been in business for generations. Penang
Economic Monthly (2006) reported that Indian Muslim culture and cuisine attracted a substantial number of high spending power tourists from countries in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and also Muslim tourists from China. The report noted that in addition to beaches, shopping and cultural and heritage buildings in Penang, food is a fundamental element of the tourist experience Penang.

Another important Penang tourist attraction associated with the Indian Muslim community is Kapitan Keling Mosque. The mosque was counted among the top 12 attractions in Penang in 2012. The principal motivation to visit for Muslim tourists is attending the call to prayer at the mosque, whilst for non-Muslims, admiring the architecture is the main factor, which is further facilitated by the Islamic Propagation Society International’s guided tours. The Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) established the Muslim Heritage Trail in 2006, with Kapitan Keling as the first stop in a series of significant sites that date from the 18th century, and still form the Muslim enclave today.

**Staging Indian Muslim Identity: The Indian Muslim Cultural Heritage Celebration (IMCHC)**

The strategy for presenting Indian Muslim cultural heritage for education and tourism purposes includes the promotion of Kapitan Keling Mosque, and a broader cultural revival centered on themed festivals and other events, as in the Indian Muslim Cultural Heritage Celebration (IMCHC), organized by iMcom in conjunction with the Georgetown Festival. According to the chairman of iMcom, the main objective of the program is to reinvigorate traditional culture for the younger generation of Indian Muslims, whom are perceived to lack interest in tradition, as well as to strengthen ties throughout the community. The program regards intangible heritage just as important as tangible, and takes cuisine, clothing, traditional games and local histories into consideration.

World Heritage Day was established in 2009, and the following year iMcom began efforts to participate in the Georgetown Festival. In our interviews, the chairman explained that at first they did not have many ‘products’ to offer that represented Indian Muslim culture, since many of the new generation had grown up not practicing these traditions. After various meetings and discussions, they then began to collect materials and practices considered
appropriate’ representations of Indian Muslim identity. These were collected from family members, the elderly and also borrowed from Penang State museum. Kapitan Keling Mosque’s management cooperated with iMcom in rounds of discussions to select the kinds of activities and material that could represent the ‘authentic’ ethnic identity of Indian Muslims. In one instance the traditional Indian game *pallanguli* was selected under this rubric of authenticity, but according to interviewed group members, the paraphernalia had to be obtained from India as the younger generation no longer played it.

Other activities organized for the celebration included the Kapitan Keling Mosque Tour, which included the Noordin Family Tomb Hall which is located beside the mosque. During the celebration, the Hall was turned into a small museum showcasing the history of the Indian Muslim community in Penang, various exhibits including traditional cooking utensils, costume, demonstrations of traditional games and Indian Muslim cuisine. All these activities were organized within the compound of the mosque and its surrounds. This paper will now focus on the centrality of Kapitan Keling Mosque in the lives of the Indian Muslim community, and how the mosque is interpreted as a key symbol of Penang Indian Muslim identity.

*Kapitan Keling Mosque: Locus of Indian Muslim Ethnic Identity*

As the oldest mosque in Penang, Kapitan Keling Mosque is regarded as the most important tourism product in local tourism development. It is described in almost all Penang tourist brochures as a “must see” or “must visit” place in Penang. For the local community, the mosque not only represents Indian Muslim identity but it also denotes the existence of a strong Indian Muslim community in Penang. Located within the core zone of the Georgetown UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Kapitan Keling mosque has a significant function and role in the Indian Muslim community. The mosque is not only viewed as a place of worship but also a centre for Islamic teaching and also a place for social activities, particularly during Ramadhan month. As Khoo Salma stated (2014), “...the Kapitan Keling Mosque is the principal mosque and centrifugal institution which historically provided Muslims of Indian origin with a symbol of belonging and a sense of place, and continues to do so today”.
Early History of Kapitan Keling Mosque

The title “Kapitan” is from the English word “Captain” and refers to leader of the community. Being the first Kapitan Keling, Caider Maideen proposed the construction of a mosque to the British administration, whom in 1801 approved a piece of land located between Pitt Street and Chulia Street. The mosque was built using imported materials such as wood and metal from India and Europe, and was completed in 1930. It was restored in 2002 after the federal government granted funding of RM 5.5 million (Ibrahim 2006).

The Kapitan Keling mosque is not only strategically located in the inner city of Georgetown but it is also surrounded by gold jewellery shops run by members of the Indian Muslim community. According to the respondents, the community is very proud of the mosque, and hold that it contributes hugely to the substance of their community. This was reflected by the Chairman of the mosque:

“...the mosque is a holy place for Muslims to perform their religious obligations. We also welcome visitors and tourists who want to appreciate the beauty and the architecture of the mosque. We do not want to disappoint those who have come so far away to see the mosque”.

“...a mosque will not lose its glory as long as Muslims continue to fulfil their religious obligations. Tourists who are not appropriately dressed can still enter the mosque by wearing the robe provided at the entrance”.

These statements indicates that the community is willing to receive tourists and not to limit the mosque as closed place of worship, but also as a place to disseminate information about Islam.

In one interview session with a group of Indian Muslims sitting together in the compound of the mosque after the Asar prayer, two men in their 60’s recalled some childhood memories of being part of the mosque community. Rashid and Meera recalled that newcomers who arrived from India would usually like to stay near the mosque. They said, “...where there is a settlement of Indian Muslims, there will always be a mosque (built in that area)”. Rashid
explained that Kapitan Keling mosque, which is located near Penang port, used to be a popular stopover for pilgrims from all over Malaya, particularly those who lived in northern Malaya, in places such as Perlis, Kedah and even as far as Pattani, Thailand before their departure to Mecca. They would stay in tents set up within the compound of Kapitan Keling mosque. He said, “…the atmosphere at that time was so vibrant, full of people, family members and those who had come to say goodbye, because they probably would never meet again.”

Figure 1. An old well in the Kapitan Keling Mosque which was once an ablution area for sailors. Source: the authors.

The Mosque Today

The mosque is in use five times a day, seven days a week. During festival seasons such as Eid Ul-Fitr and and Hari Raya Haji, as well as during Friday prayers, the mosque is full of Muslims performing their prayers. During an interview, the mosque muezzin (prayer leader) confirmed the institution’s enduring role in the community: “...the role of the mosque has never changed, it is still a place of worship, but now it has also become a tourist attraction”. This study found that the mosque’s management has shown concerted efforts to maintain the mosque not only as a place of worship, but also a cultural center that symbolizes the legacy of Penang’s Indian Muslim population. Various programs, lectures and workshops are held in and around the mosque. The
Noordin Family Tomb Hall, located within the mosque’s surrounds, is used as a facility for a variety of programs, including a cookery tuition program called *Let’s Cook: Traditional Indian Muslim Cooking*, which is particularly concerned with educating younger Indian Muslims about traditional cuisine.

Kapitan Keling Mosque is a very popular destination for tourists, whom are not only attracted by its distinctive Moorish architecture, but also out of curiosity about Islam. Our informant Meera worked as a volunteer tour guide, and reported a lot of visitor interest in how Muslim prayer rituals are performed, the meaning of *kiblat*, the five prayers, and even the reason Muslim men are allowed to practice polygamy.

**Presenting Kapitan Keling Mosque: Indian Muslim Cultural Heritage Celebration (IMCHC)**

The selection of the mosque as the prime locus for heritage program activities was both a natural and a strategic choice. One of the respondents explained that part of the IMCHC’s objective was to reignite the “vibrant atmosphere” of the mosque, and cement the “strong connection” between the mosque and Indian Muslim community. The space and ambience of the location was also ideal for the IMCHC’s range of educational and tourist activities, and the presentation of Indian Muslim culture.

Mosque volunteers made both domestic and international tourists welcome during the festival, and an effort was made to explain the history and architecture of the mosque. Initially, many tourists and local non-Muslims were hesitant to enter the mosque for fear of offending the worshippers, but once inside, the benign atmosphere, activities and exhibitions seemed to put most at ease. The mosque even organised a colouring competition for children, in which those of any nationality and religion could participate.
The Noordin Family Tomb Hall is another heritage site located next to the Kapitan Keling Mosque. Mohamed Merican Noordin, a Tamil Muslim who emigrated to Penang around 1820, succeeded Kapitan Keling as the prominent Chulia (southern Indian emmigrant) in Penang. In 1870, he was buried at the Noordin Family tomb, which had initially been his mother’s mausoleum (Timothy Tye 2008). Today the hall houses the Penang Malay Artist Association Art Gallery.

During the IMHCC, the Noordin Family Tomb Hall was turned into a mini museum, showcasing various traditional cooking techniques, and original utensils, betel paraphernalia and other antiques. The exhibition also contained historical documents, sartorial and other exhibits pertinent to the lives and experience of early members of the community.

**Figure 2.** Tourists on mosque tour guided by volunteers from Comparative Religion Club from Universiti Sains Malaysia. Source: the authors.

**Figure 3.** Colouring contest. Source: the authors.
**Mini Museum in Noordin Tomb Hall**

The Noordin Family Tomb Hall is another heritage site located next to the Kapitan Keling Mosque. Mohamed Merican Noordin, a Tamil Muslim who emigrated to Penang around 1820, succeeded Kapitan Keling as the prominent *Chulia* (southern Indian emigrant) in Penang. In 1870, he was buried at the Noordin Family tomb, which had initially been his mother’s mausoleum (Timothy Tye 2008). Today the hall houses the Penang Malay Artist Association Art Gallery.

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![Figure 4](image.jpg)

**Figure 4.** Various traditional cooking utensils used by the Indian Muslim ancestors. Source: the authors.
Figure 5. Description of the ‘arrival of Indian Muslims labourers in Malaya from South India. Source: the authors.

The story of Barkath Food Enterprise was narrated in one exhibit, which also displayed other famous brands produced by Indian Muslim businesses including menthol Hacks and ‘Sunquick’ orange juice.

Figure 6. Famous branded products produced by Indian Muslim businesses - Barkath Food. Source: the authors.
In addition to these exhibits, various activities were organized in which tourists could participate. The “Let’s Grind” activity allowed tourists to experiment with the traditional apparatus for grinding spices and beans, used to make the spicy pastes carried by Indian Muslim women in head baskets and sold door to door during the 1920’s.
Many of the Penang tourist brochures contain assertions such as: “the best way to experience a culture is to eat the food”. The festival organizers certainly played to this theme with an abundance of traditional food stalls and cookery demonstrations outside the mosque and along the street. These proved very popular with tourists. The variety of food on offer included the famous dishes nasi kandar and nasi biryani, raisins and dates, idiyyapam, kozhukkattai, parisriottti, apoman, and banggalibread.
Vatalapom was another particularly celebrated and showcased during the festival. Zainab, one of the volunteers at the festival, explained the importance of this dish for her family during the Muslim feast of Eid-ul-Fitr. The dish consists simply of flour, eggs, sugar and pandan leaves, which are mixed together, steamed and served right away. Zainab said that it was her intention to continue making the dish for any special events, as she saw it as constituting a part of her cultural and family heritage, handed down to her by her grandmother. She chose to participate in the festival in order to share her cookery skills with others.
Another interesting activity that attracted many participants during the festival was the 'Non Stop Teh Tarik' program. One of the aims of this event was to set a record for the Malaysian Book of Records. The event attracted about 30 participants, mostly Indian Muslim youth. Sponsored by the local milk company, 'Dairy Champ', a total of 240 cans of milk and 200 packages of tea bags were used.

Besides food, traditional games were also played during the celebration. In one corner of the mosque, several Indian Muslim children were observed playing traditional games with tourists and visitors. Among the games played during the IMCHC were Tambaran, locally known as gasing, and pallanguli, the traditional games of the Indian Communities in Tamilnadu and Karnataka, often played by women after a wedding ceremony.

Most of the activities presented in this celebration were carefully selected by the organizers with a view to deploying aspects of Indian Muslim culture that might appear exotic to tourists. The organizers also hoped that the presentation of more exotic material might be able to rejuvenate and revive interest in Indian Muslim culture, and encourage the younger generation to participate and take pride in their cultural heritage. A further example of this, unrelated to cuisine, was the Classic Bike Fiesta Program organized by...
Another interesting activity that attracted many participants during the festival was the ‘Non Stop Teh Tarik’ program. One of the aims of this event was to set a record for the Malaysian Book of Records. The event attracted about 30 participants, mostly Indian Muslim youth. Sponsored by the local milk company, ‘Dairy Champ’, a total of 240 cans of milk and 200 packages of tea bags were used.

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![Figure 13. Rows of classic bicycles gathered in front of the Kapitan Keling Mosque for public display. Source: the authors.](image)

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attracted participants from all over Malaysia and beyond. The presence of these old-fashioned bicycles contributed to the broad sense of exotic nostalgia that the festival evoked.

Summary and Analysis

This paper has attempted to give the historical context of the Indian Muslim community in Penang, and examine the community’s contemporary endeavors to retain and utilize its identity. We present data here that explicates iMcom’s efforts to collect and preserve what they view to be authentic Indian Muslim culture, and then, in cooperation with the Georgetown Festival, curate and enact this culture through a variety of means, in and around the central locus of the Indian Muslim community in Penang – the Kapitan Keling Mosque. iMcom’s aims in this endeavour were explicitly twofold; firstly, to educate the younger generation of Indian Muslims in Penang about their cultural origins, and try to engender interest and pride in their heritage. Secondly, to utilize this culture in both its material and intangible forms as a means of developing a category of ethnic or heritage tourism that was consistent with the Georgetown Festival’s approach and programs, and the broader notion of Heritage as propagated by UNESCO.

Under these rubrics, cuisine was very successfully utilized to play a major role in the festival. It was found that many members of the Indian Muslim community retained a thorough knowledge of their traditional cuisine, inherited from elder relatives, and an enthusiasm for sharing recipes and techniques with others. Cuisine is significantly linked with notions of identity for Indian Muslims, especially in the respect that certain dishes associate with specific events in their religious calendar. From the tourism development perspective, cuisine must be acknowledged as the most popular ‘tourist product’ the community has to offer. Its appeal is universal and longstanding, and is an established element of Penang’s broader tourist image, as indicated both by promotional literature and brochures, and the eminently observable popularity of the many food outlets and demonstrations in and around the mosque. Maintaining this focus on cuisine is likely to remain a cogent strategy for future events and in general. Hall and Gossling (2013) argue for the centrality of food in the tourist experience. Many other scholars point to its role in both fulfilling tourist expectations and sustaining associated cultural practices (see for example Kim et al. 2010; Kivela and Crotts 2009; Mak et al. 2012).
The role of space is also pertinent to the construction and presentation of ethnic and cultural identity. The Kapitan Keling Mosque compound and its surrounds is a natural and highly functional locus for the community and for tourism-related purposes. This religious institution has taken special responsibility for curating and displaying other non-religious elements of Indian Muslim local history and culture, and is subsequently very welcoming to visitors regardless of religious affiliation.

The prime agent in these efforts is iMcom. The members of this organization who were interviewed for this study were passionate about their ethnic and cultural identity, and its preservation and propagation. Most were specifically concerned with the fact that many younger Indian Muslims in Penang are facing a dilemma regarding their cultural identity, or even actively rejecting the Indian Muslim aspect of it. This ideological concern reverberates through all of iMcom’s efforts. The chairman of iMcom, Mohd Rizwan, described organizing the IMCHC as an important task not only for the development of heritage tourism, but for the future of his community. He voiced concern for the younger generation who he described as trying to ‘distance themselves from their own ethnic identity’. He underlined that “preserving Indian Muslim identity has always been the objective of iMcom’s establishment, which is different from other Indian Muslim associations.” It can be concluded, then, that in terms of agency, iMcom is a highly motivated, conservative organization with a very explicit agenda.

**Conclusion**

The author hopes to have cleared the way for further study in a number of directions. Our relations with iMcom were primarily conducted through the younger members of the organization, as stated in the introduction. A fuller understanding of iMcom would ideally include a survey of its senior, Tamil speaking members and affiliates, their experience and socio-political orientations, and their agency within the organization. Although this study focused on iMcom and the IMCHC, there is room for a lot more research on other Indian Muslim associations and events, and also comparative studies of Penang’s other ethnic communities and their equivalent organizations. Largescale events such as the Georgetown Festival might provide a useful basis for this comparison. This study’s line of enquiry would also be further advanced by more ethnographic research which focuses on space, place,
material and intangible culture, both within and without the context of organized events. The process and criteria for selection of certain elements as ‘authentic’, or otherwise positive, would be of particular interest.

Finally, whilst this paper has focused on iMcom’s efforts and their results, questions still remain about how the younger generation have responded to the festival and the ‘imposition’ of their heritage, beyond those directly involved or in attendance. How many are still facing an ‘identity dilemma’, and what are the specific choices and pressures that form this dilemma? Many other questions remain about the structure and cohesion of the Indian Muslim community in Penang, and the construction, presentation and consumption of its culture.

Notes

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