

IMPACTS OF SABAH'S TOURISM ON THE STATELESS PALA'U IN SEMPORNA, SABAH

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Abstract Semporna, located in Sabah, Malaysia, is renowned for its eco-tourism attractions. It is also the dwelling place of a significant population of stateless sea gypsies, locally referred to as the Pala'u. The Pala'u are a nomadic seafaring community that has resided for generations on their traditional houseboats, known as Lepa, while navigating the southeastern coastline of Borneo. Despite prevailing legal restrictions against the involvement of the stateless Pala'u in tourism activities, their mere presence in Semporna has captivated numerous tourists, attracting them to visit Semporna. This engagement has opened up employment opportunities and income sources for the Pala'u. As tourism continues to grow in Semporna, Sabah, the participation of the Pala'u in Sabah's tourism has exerted significant influences on the well-being of this minority indigenous group. This study adopted a qualitative approach and, drawing on data gathered from key informant interviews and secondary sources, explored the participation of the Pala'u in Sabah's tourism. The research posits that Malaysia should formulate a specific policy to regulate the involvement of the Pala'u in tourism, as they persist as an unofficial tourist attraction in Semporna despite the prevailing prohibition. Given their historical and cultural significance, the Pala'u warrant distinctive consideration within

the legal framework to govern their participation in tourism so as to grant them essential access, means of sustenance, and protection from exploitation and criminal activities.

Keywords: Sabah's tourism, stateless, sea gypsy, Pala'u, Semporna, tourism impacts.

INTRODUCTION

Semporna, Sabah has gained a reputation for its distinctive and awe-inspiring natural beauty, establishing itself as a highly sought-after destination for tourists. The tourism sector in Sabah is defined by a wide variety of attractions and activities that captivate individuals from across the globe. These attractions encompass the world's most ancient rainforest, abundant coral reefs, marine reserves, unique native flora and fauna, and a diverse array of wildlife, including orangutans and proboscis monkeys (Zhang & Kler, 2020). Additionally, it is worth noting that it is unique in that a wide variety of cultures are represented in its populace. Nevertheless, Semporna, a well-known district in Sabah for its tourist attraction, is home to a significant population of the sea gypsy community, commonly referred to by the locals as the Pala'u. While legal restrictions prevent the Pala'u from actively engaging in tourism activities, the Pala'u distinct way of life and culture continues to draw the interests of many tourists. So far, numerous research studies have been conducted concerning the sea gypsies and their way of life. They include, but not limited to, seaweed culture and utilization: Kaur and Ang (2009) and Hussin, Yasir and Kunjuraman (2014), marine protection awareness: Clifton and Majors (2012), tourism policy and programs: Hamzah (2004) and Zulkefli, Jaafar and Marzuki (2017), community participation: Simmons (1995) and May-Ling, Ramachandran, Shuib and Afandi (2014) and Gough (2008). Other studies on sea gypsy include, security: Sadiq (2005), Leong (2009) and Kingston (2010), on human rights: Allerton (2014) and Razali (2017), on nationality status: Ali (2011), on the sea gypsies/sea Bajau themselves: Brunt (2013) and Chia (2016), impacts of tourism on Moken: Verschuur (2019) and education: Hed, Oskar and Yaacob (2022). Nevertheless, researches on the impact of tourism on the Pala'u are not as comprehensive. Therefore, this research focused on understanding the implementation of Sabah's tourism and the

impacts of tourism on the Pala'u. The findings of this research indicated that Sabah's tourism had a multitude of impacts on the Pala'u, particularly concerning their means of sustaining themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sabah's Tourism

Tourism plays a vital role in Sabah's economy, serving as one of the primary revenue sources for the state. It is the third-largest contributor to Sabah's economy, providing employment for over 80,000 individuals (Sabah Tourism, 2019). For an extended period, Sabah Tourism has been actively promoting and positioning the state as a top-tier eco-tourism hub. Typically, visitors are drawn to Sabah to partake in the appreciation of its abundant natural assets, meticulously conserved coral reefs, scenic islands, and its diverse array of ethnic communities. Semporna Sabah, is renowned for its scuba-diving locations, including those found at Mabul and Sipadan Islands that make up the integral parts of the Tun Sakaran Marine Park (TSMP). In addition to its natural charms, Semporna is the residence of about 25,000 sea gypsies (ESSCOM, 2015). Referred to as the Bajau Sama Dilaut or Pala'u, these individuals embrace a sea-nomadic way of life. Their distinctive lifestyle has attracted the curiosity of tourists who visit Semporna. However, a more urgent concern arises from the fact that they lack citizenship and are therefore considered stateless. As such, the existing legal framework does not permit them to be involved in tourism activities within the country, as indicated by Mohammad and Hamzah (2015). Nevertheless, Sabah's tourism significantly influences the way of life of the Pala'u.

The Statelessness in Sabah

The stateless community is dispersed across Malaysia, with a significant concentration residing in Sabah. Plus, this region is home to a substantial population lacking official citizenship and proper personal documentation. A stateless individual is defined in Article 1 of the 1954 UN Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons as

“...a person who is not considered as national by the state under the operation of its law.” (UNHCR, 2014).

In a simple term, a stateless individual is someone who lacks citizenship, and as a result, there is no legal relationship between a government and the individual. Approximately 12 million individuals globally are impacted by statelessness, as reported by UNHCR in 2012. It is evident that statelessness and the absence of proper documentation represent substantial policy concerns (Brunt, 2013). This matter has generated significant attention, particularly from both a human rights and legal perspective, as highlighted by Brunt in 2013 and Tucker in 2013. Kingston (2010) asserts that the issue of statelessness also contributes to social problems within society. Meanwhile, Chia (2016) points out that governments worldwide, such as those in Eastern Europe, have adopted various approaches for their nomadic populations, like the Roma people (land gypsies), including assimilation and expanding citizenship, among other measures. However, when it comes to Malaysia and the sea gypsies, the intention appears to be different, with no apparent inclination to integrate them into the state or pursue inclusive policies for this community (Chia, 2016). In her research, Chia (2016) noted that Malaysia does not officially recognize statelessness. Furthermore, the Bajau Laut population, commonly referred to as the sea gypsies, is categorized as stateless, and the Immigration Department faces challenges in addressing this issue. Nevertheless, in 2008, an initiative was launched to address the situation. The Sabah Government collaborated with the Federal Government to provide an impermanent identity card, known as the “green card”, to illegal immigrants, political refugees, and stateless individuals. This card served as a temporary form of citizenship for these people (Ali, 2011).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), the number of stateless individuals in West Malaysia decreased from 40,000 in 2009 to 12,400 by the end of September 2017. In East Malaysia, specifically Sabah, there is no official count of stateless people; however, the sea gypsies alone are estimated to be around 25,000 (ESSCOM, 2015). Razali (2017) explains that the sea gypsy populations include the *Sama Dilaut* or *Bajau Laut*, traditionally migratory people, with many

having settled in Sabah's coastal areas. Lacking access to healthcare, education, and formal employment, they must rely on their own survival skills, such as fishing, for sustenance. Furthermore, the sea gypsies are not eligible for IMM13, a social visa for refugees (Brunt, 2013). IMM13 holders are generally allowed to work in the country. As stateless individuals, they face a multitude of challenges. As afore mentioned, stateless people lack basic rights and access to national healthcare, education, and formal employment. They are also deprived of the freedom of movement and the right to participate in elections as voters (Razali, 2017).

The Pala'u in Borneo

The term *Pala'u* is used to refer to the sea gypsies who reside in the Semporna district of Sabah, Malaysia. These sea gypsies are also known as the *Bajau Laut*, *Bajau Samah*, or *Sama Dilaut*, and they lead a unique way of life as nomadic seafarers. As sea nomads, they are commonly located along the coastal areas and islands of Semporna. The *Pala'u* are historically known for their nomadic way of life, traveling across the seas and coastal areas in the Sulu Archipelago and parts of Sabah. They are skilled navigators and fishermen, relying on their traditional knowledge to survive in the maritime environment. Hassan and Peters (2020) indicates in their study,

In Sabah, there are three groups of Bajau: The West Coast Bajau, the various groups of East Coast Bajau and the Bajau Laut who can be found along Sabah's east coast, and around the islands off of Semporna. These three groups can be differentiated by their language and dialects, as well as livelihood, status in life, education, community structure and their general worldviews. The West Coast Bajau and the East Coast Bajau have slowly integrated themselves into the Malaysian society, while the *Bajau Laut* continue their semi-nomadic life at sea and are generally regarded as stateless by the Malaysian Government.

In addition to Sabah, Malaysia, these sea gypsies are also present in various other Southeast Asian countries. For instance, in southern Burma and Thailand, they are referred to as the Moken Chao Ley people, also known as sea gypsies. As outlined by Granbom (2005), the Chao Ley community

comprises three distinct groups known as Moken, Moklen, and Urak Lawoi. In the Sulu Sea region, as described by Brunt (2003), various terms are used to classify different ethnolinguistic groups, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1 *The Classification of Terms Used for the Ethnolinguistic groups*

Philippines	Malaysia
Tausug	Suluk, Tausug
Samal Samar Sama	Bajau, Bajau Darat Bajau Kubang Bajau Asli (Original Bajau) Bajau “Mainland”
Sama Dilaut Bajau Luwa’an (by Tausug)	Bajau Laut Bajau (<i>’Pala’u</i>) Bajau (<i>’Pala’uh</i>) Bajau (Palu’u) “sea gypsies”

Source: Adapted from Brunt (2003).

Participation in Tourism

According to Arnstein (1969), participation of representatives in the legislative body is fundamentally the cornerstone of the widely accepted concept of democratic governance, as advocated universally. Meanwhile, from a tourism standpoint, increased community engagement is essential in the process of tourism planning, as it is regarded as an integral component of the tourism product (Simmons, 1994). Typically, community involvement in government activities, particularly within the tourism sector, is unavoidable. Nonetheless, there are situations that may hinder community participation. For instance, in the case of Semporna, Sabah, a renowned tourist destination that has gained global recognition. There are various ethnic communities, and some of them may directly participate in tourism activities. However, they are not permitted to participate in tourism activities in the cases of *Pala’u*. The participation of the *Pala’u*, or sea gypsies, in Sabah’s tourism industry is relatively limited due to their stateless status, hence the legal restrictions therewith.

In the context of community involvement, the Mabul Island case study highlighted that some group of population have either chosen not to engage in tourism-related activities or have been excluded from such opportunities based on government regulations (May-Ling et al., 2014). As per government directives, individuals without legal status are prohibited from taking part in government activities, with potential legal repercussions for non-compliance.”

It is essential to note that the *Pala'u* participation in Sabah's tourism is often limited due to their stateless status, which may restrict their access to certain opportunities and services. They also express apprehension regarding potential legal consequences enforced by governmental authorities (Mohammad & Hamzah, 2015). On the other hand, proponents of social equality advocate for the principles of fairness and equitable access to resources for all individuals. This concept envisions a scenario where every person has an equal chance to partake, reap benefits, engage in decision-making, and oversee resources for the advancement of the tourism industry (Mbaiwa, 2005). The involvement of the community is of utmost importance in guaranteeing sustainable development within the tourism sector.

Pala'u and State's Tourism

From a tourism perspective, there is a growing demand for increased community engagement in the planning process, as it is considered an integral component of the overall tourism experience (Simmons, 1994). Generally, community involvement in government activities, especially within the tourism sector, is a pervasive practice. However, the concept of 'participation' can be understood in various ways. To provide clarity regarding the different forms of participation, a typology has been developed (Pretty, Gujit, Thompson & Scoones, 1995). For instance, 'manipulative participation' signifies a scenario where authority or external parties retain complete control, while 'interactive participation' or 'self-mobilization' involves local residents actively participating in decision-making related to pertinent issues and resources (Pretty et al., 1995).

Community involvement in tourism encompasses a range of forms, including village tourism, ecotourism, arts and crafts tourism, rural tourism, and agritourism. In Semporna, Sabah, the combination of ecotourism and village tourism is a common practice, allowing tourists to appreciate both the natural surroundings and the cultural traditions of local villages. While community participation is highly valued in the tourism industry of a region, there are situations where such engagement is restricted by legal constraints. Because of their illegal status, the sea gypsies of Semporna, Sabah, are one of those communities who face such a prohibition. In contrast, Tosun (2000) argues that community participation is a fundamental element in a nation's development, as it necessitates the involvement of the community in all facets of development planning to ensure the successful execution of projects. According to Mohammad and Hamzah (2015), when the community itself becomes the central point of interest, its active participation becomes crucial in enhancing the tourist experience. In fact, due to the sea gypsies' distinctive way of life, visitors are drawn to Semporna not only to appreciate the natural surroundings but also to observe the sea gypsies as they go about their daily lives. Travelers are even willing to pay a premium to local tour operators for the opportunity to visit the sea gypsies' settlements in and around the coastal areas of Semporna (Brunt, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In line with the research questions of this study, the aim of this research was to gain insights into the execution of Sabah's tourism and assess the consequential *Pala'u* involvement. As a qualitative research, it gathered firsthand information through in-depth interviews. The data collection process took place in the islands near Semporna, Sabah, involving various stakeholders including the sea gypsies, local communities, local authorities, and relevant government departments. Primary data collection was conducted for two years i.e. April 2019 to June 2021. The analytical descriptions of the processes and outcomes were then supplemented and given context through the researcher's field work. Thematic analysis as a systematic method was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Qualitative data was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews with members of the *Pala'u* tribe, community leaders, the local community, and key informants. These interviews were conducted in the local language to ensure cultural sensitivity and to establish good interrelationship. Plus, a translator was engaged to aid in the study during interviews with the *Pala'u*, as they were unable to communicate in local languages. Furthermore, participant observation was employed to obtain direct insights into the daily lives, cultural traditions, and challenges encountered by the community.

Selection of Respondents as Interviewees

Interviewees were selected using a purposive sampling technique, wherein individuals were chosen based on specific criteria and their expertise in relevant fields (Tongco, 2007). The in-depth interview lasted from 30 April 2019 to 8 June 2021 involving 23 interviewees. As soon as the interview process was over, all interviews were recorded and transcribed completely. The identity of the participants is kept confidential for this research. Table 2 shows an overview of respondents based on their representations.

Table 2 *The Respondents Participated in This Study*

No.	Interviewees	N
1.	Stateless sea gypsies	7
2.	General operation force (PGA)	1
3.	Immigration	1
4.	Representative of local authority	1
5.	Native chief	1
6.	Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM)	1
7.	Sabah Park	2
8.	Ministry of Tourism, Art and Culture (MoTAC) -Minister of MoTAC, Sabah. -Assistant Director of MoTAC, Malaysia (Office)	2 1
9.	Sabah Tourism Board	1
10.	Local communities	5
	Total	23

Interviews

In addition to participant observation, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted. This approach to interviewing offers a level of flexibility compared to structured interviews. While questions and topics are prepared in advance, it allows for more interaction, clarification questions, and follow-ups on answers. Guiding questions were developed prior to fieldwork, and interviewees were identified both before and during the study. As the study progressed and I gained more insight through interviews and conversations, the questions became more specific. This highlights the suitability of semi-structured interviews, as they allow for a degree of flexibility and the possibility of exploring various topics.

Data Analysis Technique

All interviews in this study were recorded as interview transcripts. After completing the fieldwork, the collected qualitative data was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Primarily, the empirical data was structured, which encompassed organizing interview transcriptions, taking notes, and reviewing audio recordings of interviews. Following this, the interviews underwent initial coding, prioritizing the identification of themes and elements rather than the development of a rigid code hierarchy. This process aims to uncover key themes and patterns across all collected data, facilitating a nuanced comprehension of the *Pala'u* community and the execution of Sabah's tourism. Interpretation and evaluation of the data were conducted, along with a critical examination of own biases and subjectivity. The end result was aimed at offering new insights into the lives of the *Pala'u* people and Sabah's tourism.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Implementation of Sabah's Tourism

Tourism plays a vital role in the state's economy, and each participant within the industry significantly contributes to its expansion. During the interview sessions, the respondents mentioned:

“..but the implementation is played more by the Sabah tourism board and the federal government is represented by MOTAC.” (Quoted from respondent 15)

“The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment is a ministry that the Sabah state government is responsible for ensuring that the tourism sector can be developed in addition to ensuring that culture and the environment in this state can be preserved.” (Quoted from respondent 16)

“So for local tourism we have MATTA and we have STA (Sabah Tourism Association), and other associations that are related to the tourism industry.” (Quoted from Respondent 15)

The Sabah Tourism Board, operating under the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Environment, holds responsibility for the planning, execution, and coordination of tourism development in the state, often collaborating with other agencies under the ministry's purview. According to the statements of those interviewed, there is a collaborative effort between the federal and state governments in overseeing the development, planning, and coordination of the tourism industry. This collaboration also extends to the involvement of various tourism organizations, including the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA) and the Sabah Tourism Association (STA) (Participant 15 & Participant 16). STA, an acronym for Sabah Tourism Association, functions as a local government entity. Furthermore, one interviewee provided a detailed overview of several agencies operating in Sabah under the purview of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Environment. The respondents stated:

“In this ministry, we oversee six agencies that are either connected to the tourism and culture sector or the environment. The first of these is Sabah Parks.” (Quoted from Respondent 16)

“The second agency under our ministry is the Sabah Tourism Board, which is responsible for promoting various interesting destinations.” (Quoted from Respondent 16)

“The Sabah Cultural Board oversees the preservation and promotion of our cultural heritage, ensuring the continuation of cultural practices. With around 232 major ethnic groups and over 201 sub-

ethnic groups in Sabah, it is their duty to nurture, develop, organize, and pass on these traditions to future generations.”
(Quoted from Respondent 16)

“We also have three government agencies that collaborate closely. For instance, the Department of Environmental Development (JEPAS) is responsible for environmental conservation. Additionally, under this ministry, we have the national museum, which oversees the state museum of Sabah, preserving our heritage and relics of the past. We also have the Wildlife Department, which focuses on wildlife conservation.” (Quoted from respondent 16)

The agencies discussed are summarized as follows:

Sabah Park

The Sabah Park is in charge of preserving the scenic, scientific and historic heritage of the Malaysian state of Sabah on the island of Borneo. The organization is also in charge of the management and promotion of Sabah’s various protected reserves, particularly those designated as national parks. It is also involved in developing tourist-friendly facilities to accommodate tourists’ arrivals to these reserves while ensuring that the reserves’ integrity is not jeopardized (Sabah Park, 2021).

Sabah Tourism Board

The Sabah’s Tourism Board is responsible for marketing and promotion of tourism for the state (Sabah Tourism, 2021).

Sabah Cultural Board

The Sabah Cultural Board is in charge of preserving, promoting and developing the cultures and traditions of Sabah’s various indigenous groups (Sabah Cultural Board, 2021).

Department of Environment (JEPAS)

The Department of Environment aims and is responsible to incorporate environmental considerations into development activities and all related decision-making processes in order to promote long-term economic growth and human development while also protecting and improving the environment (Department of Environment, 2021).

National Museum

The National Museum is responsible for carrying out museum activities such as researching, collecting, recording and publishing all the treasures of the country's historical heritage (Muzium Negara, 2021).

Department of Wildlife and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia (PERHILITAN)

PERHILITAN is a government organization in Peninsular Malaysia that is in charge of the protection, management and preservation of wildlife and national parks (PERHILITAN, 2021). Within the context of tourism, travel and tourism operators hold a significant and pivotal role, especially within Semporna, Sabah. All stakeholders in the tourism sector are obligated to adhere to the legal framework and regulations set forth by the government, encompassing aspects such as implementation, licensing and permit procedures, as well as workforce recruitment.

Sabah's Tourism and the Significance Impacts of *Pala'u* Involvement to Their Livelihood

The state government, particularly the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Environment in Sabah, faces challenges in planning and organizing activities or developments for the stateless *Pala'u* community due to documentation issues. Similarly, neither the state nor federal governments have established specific policies or regulations to govern stateless individuals in general, including the *Pala'u* due to their lack of legal status. The respondents emphasized:

“But for those who are not our citizens, that is a bit of a problem because they are not Malaysian citizens so it is quite difficult for us to include them in any government policy for the purpose of promoting tourism.” (Quoted from respondent 15)

“Well yes, it appears that there is no specific guideline or law that specifically applies to the sea gypsies, also known as the *Pala'u*, in our language.” (Quoted from respondent 16)

Despite their statelessness and limited access to basic necessities, the research found that the *Pala'u* community was still and actively engaged in the state's tourism sector, either directly or indirectly. Respondent commented:

“I have seen Palauh who work as tourist guides, assisting people returning from the island. Their language distinguishes them, especially when they communicate with each other in the evening.”
(Quoted from respondent 10)

This was despite the fact that there is no existing legislation that expressly permits the *Pala'u* to participate in the state's tourism activities. Nevertheless, the involvement of the *Pala'u* in Sabah's tourism has significant implications for their livelihood.

Tourism Unofficial Attraction

“In terms of attracting tourists, the construction of hut houses at the sea is appealing to the tourists. The way the *Pala'u* people live on the boat, their culture, successfully captures the interest of tourists.”
(Quoted from respondent 12)

As an indigenous, nomadic people of the sea who inhabit the coastal areas and islands of Sabah, the *Pala'u* possess remarkable diving and craft skills. Interestingly, this community historically resided in wooden boats known as *Lepa*, although some have transitioned to temporary, small stilt houses constructed on reefs or islands. Semporna, Sabah, is a renowned tourist destination, attracting both domestic and international visitors. In more ways than one, the research found that the unique lifestyle of the sea gypsies of *Pala'u* had undeniably positioned them as one of the unofficial attractions within Semporna's tourism attractions. Their distinctive way of life had inadvertently contributed to the appeal of Sabah's tourism, drawing more tourists to the region.

Improved Communication Skill

The *Pala'u* are notably recognized for their limited literacy and communication skills, particularly in local languages. This poses a challenge

when they attempt to communicate with the local community or international tourists. Notably, not everyone in the local community comprehends the *Pala'u* language because they continue to use their ancestral *Bajau* language, which differs from the contemporary *Bajau* dialect. The fieldwork of this research had found that although not all *Pala'u* individuals had acquired these skills, some among them had developed the ability to communicate in the local language. During the interview, respondents expressed:

“Perhaps they have been communicating for a long time, not only in Bahasa Malaysia but also in Chinese. Some individuals already understand Chinese, not from formal learning but from daily interactions. This communication may start with sign language and gradually progress to spoken language that allows for basic communication.” (Quoted from respondent 10)

“In fact, they can speak foreign languages such as Chinese.”
(Quoted from respondent 12)

Furthermore, a few had even become proficient in foreign languages like English and Chinese. The presence of tourists had played a pivotal role in enhancing the communication skills of the *Pala'u*. This positive change can be attributed to their interactions with tourists, who came from both domestic and international backgrounds. These interactions were necessitated by their engagement in selling seafood products to tourists, among other things.

Enhanced Economic Conditions and Quality of Life

The *Pala'u* have a long-standing presence in Sabah, particularly in Semporna. Consequently, it is indisputable that these individuals are exposed to and impacted by modernization, particularly the rapid expansion of the tourism industry. Additionally, the significant growth of tourism in Semporna, Sabah, attracting a substantial number of visitors, has generated both direct and indirect positive outcomes for the *Pala'u* community. Currently, there was evidence of an improved standard of living among some stateless *Pala'u*. Their proficiency in diving and seafood harvesting, skills originally employed for sustenance, had been instrumental in enhancing their economic well-being. Seafood is a highly sought-after attraction in

Semporna, largely due to the influx of tourists. Consequently, this stateless *Pala'u* community had opted to market their seafood products to tourists. According to the individuals interviewed, these stateless sea gypsies of *Pala'u* charged premium prices for the seafood they sold to visitors. The respondent highlighted in the interview:

“It improves the economic status of the Pala’u. Typically, tourists visiting here have a fondness for seafood. I am confident that the Palauh people can significantly profit from this, as seafood is often purchased at high prices.” (Quoted from respondent 9)



Figure 1 The view of stateless sea gypsies of '*Pala'u*'selling their seafood products to tourists

Source: Author (2019)

Moreover, as per the results of the fieldwork, it was observed that stateless *Pala'u* had established a small marketplace where they sold their handmade products to tourists. This venture had contributed to the enhancement of their economic conditions. Remarkably, certain tourists preferred to make purchases from these *Pala'u* due to their more competitive pricing in comparison to seafood restaurants in Semporna, Sabah. Additionally, some *Pala'u* had even acquired proficiency in operating technological devices like mobile phones.



Figure 2 The hand crafting works made by the 'Pala'u for tourism product
Source: Author (2020)



Figure 3 The view of the souvenir shop in Kg. Sama Relaut Mabul Island, Semporna Sabah
Source: Author (2019)

Illegal Employment

Despite the numerous positive impacts observed, this research had also found that tourism had had adverse consequences for the *Pala'u* community. The tourism boom in Semporna, Sabah, has given rise to illegal employment practices. As per the insights generated from semi-structured interviews, all participants emphasized the necessity of proper legal documentation for job applications, constituting one of the fundamental requirements for employment. Hiring individuals without the requisite legal documentation was deemed unlawful. Nevertheless, certain businesses persisted in hiring employees who lacked the necessary documentation. This illegal employment situation had significantly affected the stateless *Pala'u* community.

According to the interviewees, who were themselves stateless *Pala'u*, some resorts had employed them despite their lack of legal documentation. A few had found work as housekeepers or carpenters within these resorts, while others had collaborated with local residents to sustain their daily lives. They said:

“I work as a housekeeper for 5 years already at the resort. They hired us based on experience only because we do not have any documentation and paid RM450 monthly.” (Quoted from respondent 2)

“I work as a carpenter for 10 years at XX company and paid RM20 per day whenever my servise is needed.” (Quoted from respondent 1)

Additionally, it was noted that certain stateless *Pala'u* were engaged in restaurant employment and worked as unauthorized tour guides. However, these businesses were adept at concealing the undocumented and illegal status of their workers. The primary factors motivating the employment of stateless *Pala'u* were their strong work ethic and willingness to accept lower wages. According to the informants, the remuneration offered typically ranged from RM150 to RM450 per month and RM20 to RM30 per day, albeit not on a daily basis. This compensation, however, fell below the legally mandated minimum wage. Given their stateless status in Semporna, Sabah, these individuals had become involved in unauthorized employment. The

information provided by the informants indicates that stateless *Pala'u* were employed by both local communities and unscrupulous tourism companies, primarily due to their willingness to accept lower wages to sustain their cost of living.

Culture Shifting

“Most of these individuals are already shifting from their original lifestyle. From living with their fishing and diving skills, now most of them begging for money and foods from the locals and tourists.”(Quoted from respondent 12)

The stateless *Pala'u* invariably find themselves in a vulnerable position. The substantial surge in tourist influx to Semporna, Sabah, driven by the tourism boom, has significantly impacted the traditional way of life within the stateless *Pala'u* community. According to the information provided by informants, the stateless *Pala'u* had deviated from their traditional customs. Initially renowned for their diving skills and fishermen's lifestyle, a considerable number had resorted to street begging, treating it as a profession. This shift can be attributed to their assimilation into the culture of the tourists who visited them and offered food and monetary assistance. While they perceived this as a positive development, it also had adverse effects on Sabah's tourism. The stateless *Pala'u*, known for their purity and innocence, had begun experiencing social problems. Substance abuse, particularly drug usage, had emerged as a prominent social issue. Furthermore, the interviewees noted that some had become involved in minor criminal activities. Accordingly, the stateless sea gypsies *Pala'u* were exceptionally vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation by external parties, particularly individuals from neighboring countries.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia does not have any specific policy in governing the participation of the *Pala'u* in the state's eco-tourism industry. The related law that the government has put in place today is just a blanket rule that prohibits the participation of the stateless in the state's tourism, However, the *Pala'u*,

mainly for historical and cultural traditions, warrant different treatment more so since they can contribute significantly to the state's tourism. By now, the government can no longer turn a blind eye to the involvement of the *Pala'u* in Sabah's tourism as the participation of the community is necessary in tourism development. Besides, the focus of present tourism policies and programs are generally broad with none of them touch on the *Pala'u* interests in the tourism industry despite the fact that this is also one of the pressing issues in Sabah's tourism. Moreover, the government has a responsibility to address this issue amicably. No matter how one sees this issue from, the involvement of the *Pala'u* in promoting Sabah's tourism can neither be denied nor stopped. It is however also a fact that brings with it a host of many other questions from legal, human rights and moral standpoints.

Sabah's tourism has undeniably had a significant impact on the *Pala'u* livelihood in various ways. Evidently, without proper documentation, their rights as employees in terms of standard wages and entitlements are uncertain. Nonetheless, it is possible to integrate this community into the state's tourism sector by proposing a well-structured program, and law, that aligns with their sea gypsy lifestyle without infringing upon their rights. This would not only benefit the state's tourism but also cater to the needs of *Pala'u*, thereby legally boosting the state's economy. Having said that, this research recommends the establishment of specific rules and regulations to facilitate the lawful involvement of sea gypsies in the state's tourism activities. The government could collaborate with neighboring countries and organizations like the United Nations (UN) to address statelessness issues among the sea gypsy population and integrate them into the state's tourism activities whilst protecting their human rights and promoting the interests of the state's tourism.

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