

COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM- THE ATTRACTION OF 'EMBHAN' COMMUNITY IN KAMPUNG SEMBAN, SARAWAK.

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ABSTRACT

Kampung Semban is a remote village and currently renowned for its Embhan community which is one of the sub-ethnic groups of Bidayuh in Sarawak. This community has been widely portrayed in the local tourism industry through the spectacular appearance of their last remaining 'Ring Ladies'. These special ladies wore brass-rings around their calves called 'rasung', and brass-rings around the forearms known as 'ruyang'. However, based on research, the researcher found out that there are more than just the 'Ring Ladies' factor that draws visitors to Kampung Semban. This paper aims to describe the findings based on the researcher's experience and observation relating to the additional attraction factors in Kampung Semban and propose it in promoting and boosting this industry further. The researcher anticipated that the potential of these findings could be employed as a proposal in enhancing the development of this competitive community-based tourism in BIMP-EAGA region particularly in Malaysia. To conclude, it is hope that this writings could also be utilized as part of the contribution towards enriching the visual references and records pertaining to the existing community-based tourism in Kampung Semban.

Keywords: Embhan, Ring Ladies, Semban, Attraction Factors, Community-based Tourism, Visual Reference

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kampung Semban has been known as one of the most remote villages up in the Padawan mountain range with no access road deep within the jungle of primary forest in Sarawak, Malaysia. Due to the extreme gradients surrounding this area, it takes about five to six hours adventure walking distance to arrive from Bengoh Dam. It has remained isolated and renowned for its Embhan community which is one of the sub-ethnic groups of the Bidayuh.

There is no doubt that the trip to Kampung Semban was heavily influenced by the stories related to the existence of these 'Ring Ladies' (figure 1). However, Kampung Semban was not only interesting because of these women but there are also several other factors that contribute to tourism to this village. The trip to Kampung Semban is great for individuals who loves culture, adventure and nature and those who are constantly exploring for new discovery especially in Sarawak. The Embhan people way of life that surrounded by forests and high mountain itself is exciting to explore. However, these factors are not addressed nor promoted widely and the researcher believes these factors should be highlighted for consideration in ensuring that community-based tourism to develop.

In this research, qualitative data-collection methods were used. These involved semi-structured key informant interviews, community-based visual records and feedback sessions. The interviews were conducted with key people who were

identified through the researcher's experience. This research generates direct evidence of awareness, the importance of natural resources for tourism and the change in people's attitudes, perceptions and values, which has led to an improved community-based tourism industry. It is hope that this finding is useful for the BIMP-EAGA programme, one of whose founding premises is that resource management will improve if people benefit from resources through financial incentives and proprietorship.

2.0 COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN KAMPUNG SEMBAN

Referring to Asker (2010), community-based tourism is about the community that required the involvement of two parties that is between the visitor and the host community, and its own and manage by the community itself. In other words, community-based tourism is tourism in which local residents (often rural, poor and economically marginalized) invite tourists to visit their communities with the provision of overnight accommodation. The residents earn income as land managers, entrepreneurs, service and produce providers, and employees. At least part of the tourist income is set aside for projects which provide benefits to the community as a whole. The importance of community based tourism is its emphasis on active participation and empowerment of local people in the tourism opportunity.

Community-based tourism is a visitor-host interaction that has meaningful participation by both, and generates economic and conservation benefits for local communities and environments.

WWF (2001)

Community-based tourism is tourism that takes environmental, social and cultural sustainability into account. It is managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life.

Mann (2001)

Community-based tourism enables the tourist to discover local habitats and wildlife, and celebrates and respects traditional cultures, rituals and wisdom. The community will be aware of the commercial and social value placed on their natural and cultural heritage through tourism, and this will foster community based conservation of these resources. One of the primary aims of community-based tourism is to ensure that the economic returns from tourism go back to the communities. All of these can be seen in Kampung Semban especially on how they preserve their natural and cultural heritage despite of modern influence that slowly creeps into their daily lives.

Community-based tourism is still less popular, especially in Sarawak. Tourist destination in the state mostly centred on the natural and cultural attractions and less involvement of local residents as practiced in the community based tourism. Therefore, one of the purposes of this research in Kampung Semban is to examine the effectiveness of community-based research activities here.

According to Ashley, Roe and Goodwin (2001), there are four critical factors that constrain or facilitate progress that need to be addressed in community-based tourism:

- i. Access to the market: physical location, economic elites and social constraints on local producers.
- ii. Commercial viability: product quality and price, marketing, strength of the broader destination and funding mechanisms.

- iii. Policy framework: Land tenure, regulatory context, planning process, government attitudes and capacity.
- iv. Implementation challenges in the local context: filling the skills gap, managing costs and expectations and maximising collaboration among stakeholders.

For the purpose of this study, two key questions were raised:

- i. What are the main direct and indirect factors attracting tourist to Kampung Semban and benefits of the community-based tourism to the communities of Kampung Semban?
- ii. What are the key factors underlying successful community based tourism development in Kampung Semban that has been identified by the community members?

In order to do this research, there were several significant research limitations that included:

- i. Time and field visit resource constraints –stay only 4 days 3 nights.
- ii. Low response from the villages – some timid villagers and communication barrier.
- iii. A lack of documentation and/ or dissemination of community-based tourism experiences in Sarawak.

3.0 ATTRACTION FACTORS

In Kampung Semban, only a few tour coordinators carry out activities based on community-based tourism. Based on results from interviews with Mr.Sagen Adan¹,only there people offering homestays to support community-based tourism in Kampung Semban. However, based on observation, the villagers also play a role in the success of the tourism industry here. This can be seen by way of hospitality and the warm response of the villagers when welcoming the visitors to the village. Each of them seemed to understand their responsibilities in meeting the requirements of visitors and entertain any request related to the visit.

Tour visits to Kampung Semban can only be made through local travel agents and no extensive promotion were carried out to portray the uniqueness that are offered. Based on experience during a visit to this village, there are several factors that lead to promotion of tourism to Kampung Semban quite difficult. Among those identified are:

- i. The absence of a suitable access road to Kampung Semban. Existing access road is built through a short cut through the forest and cannot use any land vehicle except on foot.
- ii. Location of Kampung Semban is too far into the forest and the challenging journey takes between four to six hours on foot for tourists to reach the village and is limited only to those who are fit to walk and not suitable for children and the elderly.
- iii. The construction of Bengoh Dam to some extent has a great impact towards the future of tourism in Kampung Semban. The connection between the villages and the outside world will be even tougher if no proactive action is taken as tourism activities in Kampung Semban will be extinct.

However, for the time being community-based tourism activities are still on-going although there are restrictions based on the above factors. There are several factors that influence the advancement of visible community-based tourism activities in the Kampung Semban and are divided into direct and indirect factors. Promotion and

¹Mr.SagenAdan was one of the tour coordinators in the KampungSemban. He has worked in tourism activities here since 1998.

marketing of the tourism industry generally confined to direct factors, but in fact indirect factors also play an important role and can be promoted as a tourist attraction.

3.1 Direct factors

i. Ring Ladies

They still maintain their traditional features, especially the Embhan women or known as the 'Ring Ladies' who still wear brass-rings on their calves and forearms. These rings are named as *ruyang* and *rasung*. At present there are only eight remaining elderly women living who are still wearing *ruyang* and *rasung*. *Ruyang* (pronounced *luyang* – figure 2) is worn on the forearms and *rasung* (pronounced *lasung* – figure 3) is worn on the calves. Both of these rings are used as ornaments to express women's beauty and almost all of Bidayuh women in the past wear these rings. Ring Ladies are among the main factors of tourist arrivals to this village because this is the only place where the culture still exists in Sarawak. Without the presence of these eight elderly, the culture of *ruyang* and *rasung* will be just a history because there are no young people wearing them at the moment.

ii. Traditional Bidayuh village.

Kampung Semban is part of the traditional village that still remain in the state. It's deep into the jungle because they are naturally protected from outside influences. Eventhough Kampung Semban is not a longhouse village as before but Embhan people still practice their traditional practices, especially among older people in this village. Life here is less influenced by urban living and traveling life was calm without the hustle and bustle of the city. This uniqueness is also seen as one of the major factors why Kampung Semban have a potential as a tourism center in the state.

iii. Spectacular nature- river and waterfall, herbal plant

The existence of the Kampung Semban deep in the jungle provided its environment with beautiful flora and fauna. The high waterfalls here are at different elevations (figure 4) and also varieties of herbal plants with nutrients and medicinal use. 'Susukng' (Highest) and 'Pent' (Beautiful) are two famous waterfalls here. The journey to the waterfall takes about an hour through the forest trails and hills paddy fields. Along the way, many wild plants, flowers and herbs can be obtained and studied by researchers. In addition, there is also a very large 'ketapang' tree which the villagers named it the "peace tree" (figure 5) because based on the story, this tree was planted in recognition of peace treaty between the warring factions of Bidayuh in the past. Kampung Semban also has been called "the village above the cloud" (figure 6). From the top of the mountain here, the sunrise and the environment surrounding Kampung Semban shrouded with cloud (actually it was a thick fog) can be seen. Forth is scenery, the researcher had to get up as early as 5.00a.m and walk with a flashlight in darkness to reach the top of the mountain to have a clearer view. To a pleasant surprise, the researcher was in the middle of a terrace pepper garden and experiencing the sunrise while clouds covered the forest is truly amazing.

iv. Culture and tradition

The presence of tourists to Kampung Semban is usually entertained by cultural performances by the Ring Ladies (figure 7). This presentation is a form of a traditional welcoming dance and is usually performed in religious ceremonies by the community here. Another tradition that can be found here is the traditional 'parang' forging demonstration.

3.2 Indirect Factors

i. The tracks/ journey

The walk up to Kampung Semban, while painfully slow and tiring however is nevertheless one of the most interesting and rewarding experiences. The traveling to Kampung Semban will go through several other villages like Kampung Taba'Sait, Kampung Bojong and Kampung Rejoi. It was an eye opening adventure. The trail is a mixture of good jungle, adventure and a man's ability to co-exist with the world around him. It is unimaginable; to reach Kampung Semban at 1000 feet above sea level, amateur takes a six hours long walking journey through jungle trails passing bamboo groves, hill paddy fields, pepper vines, rubber trees, durian orchards and also crossing the rivers by several breath-taking bamboo bridges (figure 8).

Life in the mountains keeps Embhan people with all amenities enjoyed by others. Life here is more difficult when all the goods for daily use can only be obtained in Bengoh, the nearest village town with the distance between four to six hours on foot. Most men and women from Kampung Semban commute to the village by carry goods at their back estimated to weigh over 10 kilograms, some even carrying gas cylinders weighing over 20 kilograms each (figure 9). Observing this activity is unusual for us who use to live in the city. The researcher were impressed and at the same time surprised to see the determination, the strength and endurance of this Embhan people especially encountering the older women who are still able to walk through the woods and the rugged terrains surrounding the village.

Among the main routes here that need to be overcome before reaching the Kampung Semban are two bamboo bridges respectively between 50 meters to 70 meters long and between 15 meters to 20 meters in height from the water. In addition, there were nearly 20 relatively short bamboo bridges can also be found along the way.

Because of the difficulties face at the entrance to Kampung Semban, parts of the villagers and most of the tourists have to hire porters (figure 10) for the purpose of transporting goods. Based on experience, despite all the goods and bags carried by porters and we only carry a small bag and drinking water, travel is still difficult and tiring. The researcher had to stop to rest several times at various rest shady spots that have been prepared by the villagers along the way (figure 11). Although tired, but all the pain and hard work disappeared when arrived at Kampung Semban. The tour experience, challenges and hospitality from the locals is something unique and can be promoted as a tourist attraction to the village.

ii. Villagers acceptance/hospitality

The hospitality of the people in Semban is overwhelming. They shared with the visitors the beautiful produce of their land, ensuring visitors enjoy and experience all the things they wanted to see and even had the doors of their home open for the visitors to visit and take pictures.

Given most of the people of Malaysia are Muslims, the absence of dogs and pigs in Kampung Semban can also be a good factor in promoting this place. The absence of both of these animals also recognizes this village is clean and a comfortable place to visit. The experience staying with local families is also among the interesting experience. Not many activities that can be done at night because electricity is supplied by generator for only three hours every day between the hours of 7.00 to 10.00 p.m. The cool temperature normally sets in by 9.00 p.m. Despite this, we still find it fun to chat in the dark talking about our expedition experience of the previous day.

iii. Social and daily life – porter and harvesting.

Embhan's life is quite unique and little known by the outside community. Farming is a major economic activity here. Most of the people plant hill paddy, pepper, barley, cocoa and corn. Pepper is the most widely cultivated crops and profitable to sell while hill paddy usually for their own use. The farms are quite a distance from Kampung Semban and experience across the forest to the farm is not much difference as when we came to Kampung Semban. On harvesting season, most villagers worked together to harvest hill paddy (figure 12). Normally the landlord will call relatives and friends of the village for help in this process. Some of them are hired while the other half will receive a portion of the harvested rice as a reward. In the evening, a reception will be held by the landlord to celebrate the help and assistance given by the villagers. This activity can also be included as another tourist attraction in Kampung Semban calendar.

At the same time, the researcher was so lucky to come to Kampung Semban during the durians season and many durian orchards can be found in the vicinity of this village. Activities through the forest becomes more fun-filled finding fallen durian scattered around on the forest floor and with the generosity of the villagers, visitors are allowed to enjoy them as much as they can on the spot. This activity is something that can be used as a tourism product as the durian is a king of fruit in Malaysia and enjoy free and fresh durians as this is a rare opportunity.

4.0 PROBLEMS

According to Halstead (2003), the lack of guidance in the past, as well as the fast growth of the community-based tourism industry, has caused certain sustainability problems in terms of the success of these enterprises. These problems have been compounded by a lack of awareness by all involved parties of the underlying criteria contributing to the success and/or failure of the enterprises. A key factor has been a shortage of experienced field workers/facilitators to work with communities and provide technical and logistic support.

Although the tourist attraction is a good thing and can improve the economic status of a settlement such as in Kampung Semban, but it is also likely to affect the originality and uniqueness of Embhan society itself. Eventhough rapid development has produced results which are not always aesthetically in keeping with the beauty of Embhan. Too many tourists here may result in Embhan activities to be disturbed or threatened.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Kampung Semban will disappear in a few years but the approach and the uniqueness of this village can be learnt especially to develop the community-based tourism industry in Malaysia. Among other measures that can be done, especially by governments in developing these industries are:

- i. Technical support should be provided to assist the preparation of proposals and business plans for community based tourism development.
- ii. Community participation in the tourism opportunity should be encouraged and a conducive environment for community-based tourism developed.
- iii. A list of professionals, including financial, marketing and environmental experts for community based tourism, should be drawn up.
- iv. A public education programme should be carried out so the population will be aware of their heritage and the attractions that have been developed in the sector.

- v. Commercial companies should be encouraged to become shareholders in community based tourism enterprises.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Economic activity of Embhan community are still dependent on agriculture but with the existence of community-based tourism program, the villagers could generate an additional income. Based on these studies and our observations, the effectiveness of community-based tourism in the Kampung Semban influenced by:

- i) Active participation of local people in the planning, implementation and management of the tourism enterprise.
- ii) Aspects of innovation and/or demonstration value (such as parang making and paddy harvesting).
- iii) Positive and tangible net socio-cultural, economic and environmental impacts (hospitality and sense of welcoming within the Semban people)
- iv) Access to the tourism market (adventurous journey to Kampung Semban)
- v) Commercial viability. (The remaining Ring Ladies)
- vi) Support of any relevant community-based tourism policy frameworks (such as promotion by local travel agents)

Last but not least, it is hoped that the presentation of this papers provides an opportunity for all to see the potential and the possibilities that could be explored in developing the tourism industry in the BIMP-EAGA region particularly in Malaysia.

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ATTACHMENTS



Figure 1: The Ring Ladies



Figure 2 : Ruyang (Luyang)



Figure 3 : Rasung (Lasung)



Figure 4: Waterfall



Figure 5 : Peace Tree



Figure 6 : Village above the Cloud



Figure 7 : Cultural Performance



Figure 8: Bamboo Bridge



Figure 9 : Potter with Cylinder Gas



Figure 10 : The Potters



Figure 11 : Resting Area



Figure 12 : Harvesting Hill Paddy