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## **The Nature of Cultural Contribution of a Community-based Homestay Programme**

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## THE NATURE OF CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION OF A COMMUNITY-BASED HOMESTAY PROGRAMME

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*An exploratory study utilizing qualitative approach was undertaken in 2005 to better understand the cultural contribution of a community-based homestay to both the rural communities and the visitors. The particular homestay, namely the Kampung Pelegong Homestay Programme (KPHP), is located in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. The study finds that while living culture is the core product component, education, entertainment and enrichment are important contributions of the cultural rural tourism product of KPHP to the visitors. In addition, an important finding indicates that this particular tourism product is unique as it stresses on establishing relationship ('Sillatul-rahim' in Malay) between hosts and guests whereby these relationships continue for years through letters, phone conversations, and emails. The programme also increases social cohesion among the hosts and contributes to their commitment to preserve and to provide knowledge on local customs and daily routine to enhance tourist experience.*

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JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

### INTRODUCTION

Aside from its potential contribution to sustainable development, community-based cultural rural tourism is said to be able to bring immediate benefits to both the hosts and guests. A case study of a French Acadian region on an island in eastern Canada undertaken by MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003) indeed reveals that cultural rural tourism in that region has the potential to become short and long-term economic tools to its rural communities (the hosts) and that this type of tourism provides education, entertainment, and enrichment to the guests. This paper discusses the extent of these same outcomes from a cultural rural tourism product in Malaysia, namely the Kampung Pelegong Homestay Programme (KPHP).



Kampung Pelegong is a village in the state of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia which is located 15 km from the capital city of Seremban and 30 km from the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Most of the village ancestors were immigrants from West Sumatra settled in Negeri Sembilan, bringing along their Minangkabau culture. As Negeri Sembilan is the only state in Malaysia that practices Minangkabau customs and culture, the state government is keen to turn it as an important tourism product for the state by developing several of its communities as cultural tourism destinations. When the government began to develop rural tourism, specifically through homestay programmes in the rural area, the community of Kampung Pelegong established its own homestay programme consisting of several homestay operators in August, 1996. The homestay programme hosted 500 guests annually between 1997 to 2002, and the number increased to 900 guests in 2003 and to 1633 guests in 2004 (Fatimah, 2005). Kampung Pelegong is felt to be a good case for examining the outcomes of a cultural rural tourism product in Malaysia.

To date, there is no site-specific research on how cultural rural tourism in Malaysia, such as the community-based homestay programmes, translates into its intended outcomes. The overall objective of the study is to gain better understanding of the cultural rural tourism product in the form of Kampung Pelegong Homestay Programme and its contributions to the visitors and operators.

## **METHODS**

The study is primarily exploratory in nature in that it elucidates perceptions regarding the situation of and outcomes from Kampung Pelegong Homestay Programme development. The methodology adopted for this study was thus guided by an aim to analyze visitors and residents' voices themselves, an approach which anthropologists have used to produce some particularly insightful accounts (Black, 1996). Central to the investigation was the extent of benefits it brings to the two groups.

The selection of respondents from the two groups for interview was by purposive sampling whereby respondents who were in the best position to provide information required were purposefully selected (Sekaran, 1992). This sampling technique, known as purposive sampling, was deemed appropriate as the category of people having the information that were sought for was limited within the time constraints of the study. At the beginning of the study, several individuals within each group were asked to participate in the interviews and were asked to identify any other key informants that they knew of. This generated a total list of potential

respondents. Attempts were made to contact each of these individuals via email and telephone. This resulted in 12 key informants (5 visitors and 7 residents) who agreed to participate in the in-depth, semi-structured interviews which were conducted face-to-face in Malay and/or English.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher through personal conversations. Initial interview questions followed those used in MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003) study which include respondent observation on the development and progress of tourism in the area, and their attitudes and perceptions of rural tourism development in Kampong Pelegong. Questions were open ended in order to gain more spontaneous opinions and to avoid the potential bias from restricting responses to the researcher's own fixed categories (Ryan, 1995). The interviews were, when conducted in a formal situation, tape-recorded or, when conducted during more informal or unplanned situations, written in the form of notes with reflections in field diaries. Transcriptions of the tape-recorded interviews and the reflections were done immediately after the fieldwork.

Transcripts for each taped interview and field notes were checked for internal consistency and corroborated with other interviews and notes. A qualified translator assisted in translating transcripts of conversations in Malay into English. Analysis of the interviews for meaning, salience and connections followed the 'framework' approach developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1995). The fieldwork and analysis were conducted over a period of 6 months in 2005.

## **STUDY FINDINGS**

### **Cultural Contributions to the Visitors**

This study explores the nature of cultural benefits contributed by KPHP to its visitors. Interview questions to the five guests (V1: a teacher from Singapore; V2: a journalist; V3: a participant of a motivational training program; V4: a university student; and V5: a familiarization trip participant) who had stayed with the homestay operators in Kampung Pelegong focus on the uniqueness of KPHP as a tourism product and how the homestay experience had benefit them. Findings from the interviews with each of these respondents are discussed in the following section.

#### **Respondent V1**

This respondent is a teacher from Singapore who had joined a co-curriculum activity organized by her school. The school had used the

service of a travel agent in Singapore to arrange their trip to Kampung Pelegong. The group, which consisted of 12 fifteen-year olds and two teachers, took the train from Tanjung Pagar Station in Singapore to Tiroi Station in Seremban. At Tiroi, a group of the Homestay Programme Association members waited for them and transported them to their village where they spent three “unordinary and enjoyable” days. According to her:

*“Our stay there was unordinary and enjoyable. The operators took care of us like we are their kids! They explained everything they do, maybe they wanted us to understand why they do things a certain way. Some of our group members had never stayed in villages before; they didn’t know how villages look and feel like, so this trip is good for them... We observed the ways the community worked together...they are very organized...the visit around the village is really good, we had the opportunity to get to know many trees and plants...the cultural show was a real treat, we really had a good time during the mock wedding...it was really nice. The food and boarding are not the essential parts of our stay, if we want hotel standard comfort and luxury, we would have gone to the hotels. We came here to observe and widen our knowledge and experience...”*

## **Respondent V2**

This respondent, a “self-declared urban yuppie” visited Kampong Pelegong Homestay as part of her job assignment. This is what she had to say about his experience staying at the homestay:

*“One of the members of the homestay committee showed me the fruit and vegetable farms including the village’s landmark 160-year-old rubber tree. He also introduced me around... I was introduced to authentic Malay and Minangkabau cuisine, including their ‘lemak cili api’. I even had a free lesson on how to prepare this dish. One of the operators reflected on how she once taught a Japanese school group how to make ‘lepat pisang’, how they had so much fun even though their ‘lepat’ failed to look like ordinary lepat, and the satisfaction shown by the group when they eventually tasted their ‘lepat’..... I had a chance to help them feed their free-ranged chicken!...The room is okay, but we only need the room for sleep and a place to*

*change...we are not here to stay in the room, we are here to learn different things.”*

### **Respondent V3**

This 15-year old girl stayed at KPHP during a motivational workshop organized by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall which she attended in 2004. The early part of the workshop took place in Kuala Lumpur, and another took place in KPHP. Coming from Kuala Lumpur, the respondent was not familiar with Kampong life. “Everything seems so different in the Kampong,” she says, “but I am glad that I had a chance to experience the Kampong hospitality. Those kampong people are too friendly; my foster mother spoilt me so much, now I really miss them.” She elaborated on what she gained from her stay in Kampung Pelegong:

*“I learnt to appreciate simple things, I learnt how to share, and I learnt not to do many things myself. From my experience with Kampong Pelegong, I see that Malaysia is rich with cultural customs and unique characteristics. Not all places in Malaysia are like KL, Malaysia has many natural resources and beauty. I had a chance to see how the villagers work, how they earn their living. They are not so backward, they know about many things that are modern. But, their way of livings is still kampong style. I want to go back to Pelegong again, now that I know how to get there. I want to bring my friends there too...during my stay we did several activities like learning about the names of trees, spending time at the small waterfall, learning how to cook, we also had an art class there, and we learnt about basket weaving... If the rooms are equipped with air conditioning system, then it would be more okay...but without it is also okay. This is why homestay is different, if there is air-conditioning, the concept would have perhaps been different”*

### **Respondent V4**

This respondent is a student at a local higher learning institute that had been to Kampong Pelegong during a study trip. He comes from a rural community himself. He recalled back his experience in Kampong Pelegong:

*“During that time, the lecturer, who was also our advisor for the association, took us to Pelegong as one of the association activities, because it was close to campus. There we were involved in many activities like night trekking and telematch. We went during fruit season, so we were able to eat durians. I see that Pelegong has the potential to become a tourism product, the kampung people also strive in that direction; they have become professionals. They are different, because their culture is slightly different from the culture found in other places in Malaysia...the Negeri Sembilan people, their culture...different because they have the matriarchal culture. So, if you go there, they talk a lot about the matriarchal culture, marriage customs, and their cultural activities. Another uniqueness is the special treatment that is given by the operator family, that I cannot forget... I am also a village person, so their lifestyle is also the same, but the community of Kampung Pelegong seems to be very cooperative and very organized”.*

## **Respondent V5**

*“Here, you are able to enjoy the warm hospitality of your operator family and be a part of the local household by joining them in their daily activities,” explained this respondent who was a participant of a familiarization program to Kampong Pelegong Homestay Program organized by Tourism Malaysia. He added, “The operators are always willing to let you know about the origins of the village and the rich history it holds... there are also several small business enterprise there. Each household has one product that they can sell to the visitors, some sell baskets, and others sell traditional herbs...we had a chance to look at these enterprises.” On a question posed by the researcher about what the product of Kampong Pelegong Homestay Program, the respondent explained his perception about the product, “It is a cultural product that let the visitors learn about the community’s resources and ways of life. It is different from other types of holidays...the food and hospitality of the operator families gives it more flavour...”*

Testimonies from the operators and observations by the researcher are also useful in the discussion of this study objective. It is observed that elderly family members of the operators are always ready and interested to entertain guests with stories about the history of their families, their village, and their culture. *“I am always excited to see the way they look at us when we tell stories...I always talk about myself, about the origins of*

*this kampong, about the old times. They also want to find out about many things... I really like if the committee announced that tourists or foster children are coming...sure...not so quiet then,"* explained an elderly woman whose daughter is one of the homestay operators. The desire to welcome guests can be considered euphoric. Operators like to talk about sweet experience and memories they had with their guests. They are very excited and are very optimistic about the future of their homestay program. They tolerate differences and they know what is expected from the visitors. They vow to not let outsiders belittle their culture but to teach them about it instead. Children of the operators are also getting used to seeing groups of tourists in their village. It is observed that they enjoy watching the cultural show with the tourists and that they are very hospitable to the tourists. It is also observed that a strong social cohesion exist in the community during the homestay activities. Additionally, the ability and opportunity for them to share their traditional culture, their knowledge, and part of their lives with outsiders are considered very self-satisfying.

It can be inferred from the preceding transcripts that education, entertainment and enrichment together with the accommodation, food and hospitality are important components of the cultural rural tourism product of KPHP. An explanation given by Levitt (1983) is useful to describe these components. He suggests that there are four components of a product (Figure 1). The innermost core represents the generic product. This component is the rudimentary item (tangible or intangible) without which there would be no product. For KPHP, the living culture (close-knit community with strong ties and work ethics that is able to work together, their warmth and sincere hospitality) may be the generic component of their product; without them then this product cannot be called the 'cultural rural tourism product'. However, as Levitt points out, simply offering the generic product only allows a producer entrance into the marketplace; any community that has a living culture can enter the market. It in no way ensures success. First, customers' main expectations about the product must be met.

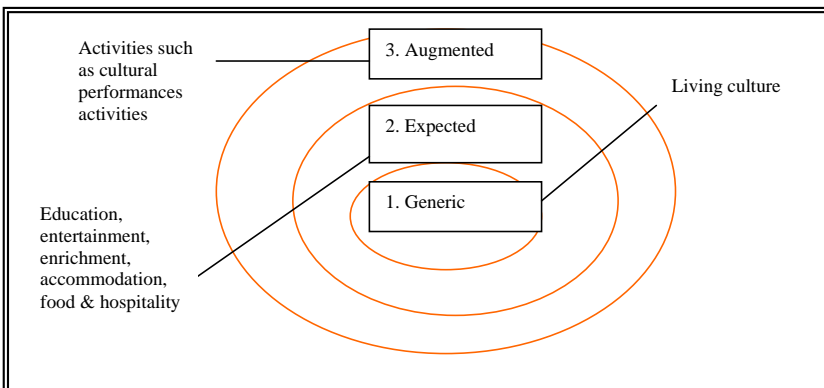
The expected component of Levitt's product concept represents customers' minimal expectations that exceed the generic product itself. The generic product cannot be sold unless those expectations are met. For homestay guests, expected attributes could include its education element including the logistics and activities required to observe the cultural show, knowledgeable operators that can educate them, and a clean and safe rural environment, as well as bedrooms, rest rooms and food services. These may represent minimum purchase conditions to some guests. For



example, even though a rural community may have abundant and interesting cultural resources, visitors may not visit that area due to known and visible safety issue in that area (the expectation of a safe rural environment is not met).

McNeill categorizes these first two components (generic and expected) of Levitt’s product factor as *hygiene factors*. These factors are variables of the product that are “must-haves”. They do not motivate the sale of the product itself, but lack of them can “de-motivate” the sale (McNeill, 1999). First, in order to gain an edge in the marketplace, destinations must look beyond the minimal expectations of a tourism product and explore how they might *augment* it. As Levitt explains, augmented product attributes are those offerings that go beyond what customers think they need or have become accustomed to expect. Augmentations can differentiate one product from another, and can give a competitive advantage to producers who effectively augment their products (Levitt, 1983). For KPHP, augmented product components include cultural activities offered by the group of operators to the visitors. While many cultural rural tourists may not expect these components, they may be motivated to visit a destination offering such augmentation over another destination that does not.

**Figure 1.** Cultural Rural Tourism product concept for Kampong Pelegong Homestay Program



### Cultural Contributions to the Residents

Economic contribution from the homestay programme to the individual operators and to the Kampong Pelegong Homestay Programme committee was examined in the study. According to a member of the committee, payment received from a group of visitors that came to the homestay programme is credited into the committee’s treasury account. The treasurer will then pay for the expenditures involved in operating the group such as payment to operators, welcome drink, transportation, cultural show, kampong feast, village tour and management (Table 1). Each operator is paid RM40 for each guest per night. An interview with an operator revealed that hosting a guest would cost roughly about RM23 (3 meals, electric and water). This brings to a marginal profit of RM17 per guest per night (Table 2). As most of the operators have the capacity to accommodate a maximum of three guests per night for each group received by the homestay program, the income could increase threefold.

**Table 1.** Costs and Profits to the Association (20 Visitors)

Receipt from a 20 pax guests (RM110 per pax, one night and two days stay)	RM2,200
Less: Payment to operators = RM40 x 20 pax x 1 night	RM800
Less: Welcome drink	RM50
Less: Morning tea	RM50
Less: Transportation	RM30
Less: Cultural show	RM650
Less: Village tour	RM100
Less: Management	RM220
Profit to the Association	RM300

*(Source: Fatimah Basiron, 2004)*

A resident who operate his home as a homestay claims the programme brings little income but “...*the money that is obtained from this homestay is ...well...not to say it is little...it is not even a lot...but this is not about money or profit. Getting involved in this programme does not require a lot of capital...the work I have done to my home like building a new toilet for the visitors and the paint work and home decoration... it is*

*not just meant for the guest, those are also for our own good, we just want to make our house beautiful, we also want to live here right? ”* Another operator explained that it is difficult to differentiate between the homestay costs and their own family expenses as they do not have separate accounts for food, electricity and water. However, there is an indication from the interviews with the operators that income from the homestay is very much welcomed, especially for the female operators who are normally not employed elsewhere, and it definitely comes in handy for the youngsters who helped around in shows, activities, cleaning, and ferrying the visitors with their motorcycles. As visitors frequently purchase locally produced goods such as herbal medication and handicrafts as souvenirs, the homestay program is seen as an outlet for the local small scale producers of this type of goods. The village’s Womens’ Group also benefit from the homestay as they formed catering services for the homestay guests during the Kampong Feast activity. They are also involved in local food display and exhibition, which in turn contribute to the preservation of the traditional food and way of cooking.

**Table 2.** Costs and Profits to the Individual Operator (1 Visitor)

Receipt from a guest	RM40
Less: Costs of meals, electric & water	RM23
Profit to individual operator	RM17

*(Source: Research fieldwork, 2005)*

The rest of the payments involved are for the local caterers (for welcome drink and feast), for the cultural show performers, to those who are involved in local transport, and for others who assisted in facilitating the activities. Relevant individuals who assisted in managing the group are also paid for their effort and time. Thus, receipts from visitors to Kampong Pelegong Homestay Programme are distributed to the villagers who are involved in the programme.

Part of the receipt from the visitors is retained in the association account. For example, the surcharge for a group of 20 guests that requested a package of 1 night and 2 days stay in the homestay program is RM2,200 (RM110 per guest), yielding a profit of RM300 to the association (Table 1). Profit from the homestay program, which came to a total of RM26,560 by 2004 (table 3), is used by the association to purchase supplies and material deemed necessary to run the program. The

association had also sent several committee members to participate in the State's Tourism Overseas Sales Mission to expose them to the industry. "We have sent members to Japan to gain experience on marketing (pricing and packaging)," explained a member of Kampong Pelegong Homestay Program Committee proudly about the committee's achievements. Youths who are involved in the cultural performances were sent for training and performances elsewhere in Malaysia as part of the committee's effort to preserve the cultural elements of traditional dances and music.

The association works very closely with the Village Development and Security Committee, headed by the village headman. The Village Development and Security Committee oversees the development of the village and the main contribution to the committee is the prize money that they won from competitions organized by several agencies which are involved in the development of rural areas throughout Malaysia. Examples of the competitions are 'The Cleanest Village', 'The Most Beautiful Village' and 'The Most Entrepreneurial Village'. Both committees may combine resources to implement community projects to beautify the village. The homestay and the seriousness shown by the community succeeded in convincing rural government agencies to improve infrastructure in the village, thus benefiting the whole community regardless of their involvement with the homestay programme.

**Table 3.** Kampong Pelegong Homestay Program Income and profit (1996 – 2004)

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of guests</b>	<b>Receipts</b>	<b>Profit</b>
1996	530	-	-
1997	30	-	-
1998	410	5,870	760
1999	415	12,600	1,370
2000	472	13,050	1,690
2001	569	19,500	3,300
2002	658	38,850	4,860
2003	908	41,737	5,250
2004	1633	52,116	8,420
<b>Total</b>	<b>5625</b>	<b>183,723</b>	<b>25,650</b>

(Source: Fatimah Basiron, 2004)

Interviews with the residents indicate that they did not feel guests bring bad influence as the guests appreciate and respect the local culture. All of the residents interviewed in the study mentioned that they had established friendships with several of their guests as they fondly show letters that they receive from the guests from their countries. Some of the visitors had even returned to visit their hosts, bringing with them their friends and families.

The appreciation shown by the tourists toward their village in turn make the villagers appreciate it themselves. The operators perceive the homestay programme as a community project that is driven by the community for the community. Some of them felt that the homestay creates an opportunity for them to be involved in the country's tourism development, as explained by one of the operator:

*“I am excited and thankful because the government has introduced homestay...introduced us to homestay...the government really supports homestay all over Malaysia. Now we know the importance of tourists in developing the country...we know more about the tourists...because we receive tourists from all over the world. This homestay is not hard to organize, as long as we want to...the government also provides training. I read in the newspapers...homestay is one way people in rural areas can get involved in tourism endeavours...count me as being proud because I am part of the tourism industry, right...!”*

Nevertheless, the interviews revealed perceptions among the resident participants of the existence of middleman that reap profit in the process of getting visitors to the programme. *“They really help us in getting tourists that want to stay in this homestay...the ones that want to use our homestay; if no tourists come, it would be difficult...but it seems that they are the ones that get a lot of profit...a lot of money, we only get a little,”* urged a resident. However, it is not clear who these middlemen are as most of the visitor groups came through the State Tourism Council the programme committee or travel agencies. An operator indicated that the motivational consulting companies that bring their training groups take advantage of the homestay program to gain profit. In addition, one of the operators suggested that she would like to see the price charged to the visitors by the committee to be increased as she felt that the price they are charging now is low. This finding seems to contradict the earlier indication that income was not the reason they participated in the

homestay programme; there is a hint here that they indeed look forward for the income from the program.

One of the residents specifically gave the indication of his frustration for not being given any guests amid being a certified homestay operator. According to him:

*“the committee should have a fair way of distributing the guests...we have received many groups this year...I have not received a single one yet...where is the justice...when I ask, they said it was because there was a single complaint made once by a Japanese guest...just that one time...they should give me a chance, give me the same as others.”*

The researcher tried to get some feedback from a committee member about this accusation about this and was given this reply,

*“...a guest complains about the service he provides, we can't just give another guest to him...it was like this, he gave the Japanese guest...Japanese school kid...taste some 'sambal belacan'...he said the kid really wanted to try it...he should have informed the kid that the 'sambal' was very hot/spicy, he should give warning...but he didn't...the kid tried and immediately felt the spiciness...then he laughed at the kid...the kid complained to the teacher and the teacher told us...not good...should feel ashamed...so we don't think we should give any more (visitors) to him.”*

## CONCLUSION

Kampung Pelegong Homestay Programme displays the characteristics of a cultural rural tourism product. Tourists that came to the programme enjoy the cultural experience and the knowledge that they gain by staying in the homes of the community and by partaking in the organized activities; these findings coincide with findings from earlier research on cultural tourism in Canada (MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003). The programme is a unique tourism product that provides sensible alternative for tourists who are looking for alternatives. In addition, an important finding indicates that this particular tourism product is unique as it stresses on establishing relationship ('Sillatul-rahim' in Malay) between hosts and guests whereby these relationships continue for years through letters, phone conversations, and emails.

The findings of the present study support earlier findings by Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (2001) that hosts and participants display euphoric desire to welcome guests. Whatever shortcomings they have in their home facilities that may reduce the level of comfort received by the guests they compensate with their warm hospitality. Cultural gap exists at a minimum in Kampung Pelegong. The hosts wanted to earn extra income while having foreign guests and sharing their daily lives with the tourists. Having visitors in their homes through the homestay programmes are indications that they are 'accepted' by the association. As part of Malay culture, hosts are expected to celebrate and be hospitable to guests that come to their homes. Income from the homestay operation can be considered to be marginal. But leakage may be very low as most services are produced locally. At a glance, the overall social and cultural impacts are likely to be positive as the program seems to increase social cohesion among the hosts and villagers and their commitment to preserve and to provide knowledge on local customs and daily routine in this in turn helps to enhance the tourist experience, similar to findings by MacDonald and Jolliffe (2003).

Findings from the study include some early feedbacks and perceptions about the programme from the hosts and guests. The programme is an outstanding community development tool, but only if it works. To ensure that community-based tourism like this one works, Beeton (2006) suggests that it is most important to explore local community attitudes toward the programme. It is useless to find out late that the locals have negative perceptions about the programme as it would be more difficult to reverse the damage.

Community-based tourism aims to create a more sustainable tourism industry, focusing on the host community in terms of planning and maintaining tourism development. Pearce (1992) suggests that community-based tourism presents a way to provide an equitable flow of benefits to all affected by tourism through consensus-based decision-making and local control of development. Thus, it is important to know if consensus-based decision-making and local control of development takes place in this homestay programme.

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