

# Theming and Imagineering as a Placemaking Strategy – A Case Study of Islamic Tourism in Malaysia

Nurul Shakila Khalid<sup>a\*</sup>, Hamzah Muzaini<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Centre of Studies for Town and Regional Planning, Universiti Teknologi MARA Selangor, Malaysia.

<sup>b</sup>Cultural Geography Chair Group, Wageningen University and Research, The Netherlands.  
E-mail of corresponding author: nshakila89@gmail.com

## Abstract

Malaysia has deployed many tourism themes, beginning with “Malaysia, Truly Asia” to the more temporal-specific themes of “Visit Malaysia Year” and “MyFest 2015” to portray its uniqueness within the context of the multiracial country. Malaysia aims to capitalise on the diversity of its attractions and transform them, via spatial imagineering, into fodder to materialise its marketing image as a Muslim country. Using the key concept of thematisation and imagineering, this study provides an understanding not only on how people shape places materially, socially and symbolically, but also the ways in which this has been contested. Drawing on in-depth interviews with local Malaysians from different ethnics background as the indirect stakeholders, the findings offer the constructivist and post-structuralism perspectives on seeing how Islamic tourism has been received in terms of making the country unique in order to enhance ethnic harmony, as much as to capture tourist imagination and capital investments to create new country imaginaries. Hence, to achieve the objectives of engineering of societies as meant to encourage locals to rediscover local places and attractions, and bridge understanding between multi-ethnicity populations towards the nation-building.

Keywords: Theming, imagineering, placemaking, Islamic tourism, contestation.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the world, thematic development has grown rampantly and in diverse ways (Zukin, 1995; Paradis, 2004). Thematic development in tourism industry which means the repackaging of geographical areas or leisure sites based on a unifying identifiable and consistent idea (Yeoh and Teo, 1996). At present, many tourist destinations all over the world compete with each other in introducing specific tourism themes and selling these place themes, by cultural (re)presentation and the construction of identities often to project images of excitement and target at selected audiences (Yeoh, 2005; Yang, 2011). Every tourism theme is formerly implemented in specific tourist destinations through the practicing of imagineering strategies; in the form of attractive taglines and marketable images of local cultures and traditions, or the developments of geographically-bounded areas or spaces in terms of material (re)appropriations and the conduct of special events and festivals that are in line with the chosen theme (Yeoh, 2005). This includes the Sea Café in Penang which make visitors feel like they are dining at the Santorini Island, casinos like the Venetian Macao, where a Venice-theme has been implemented to make attractions in Macao look like the in Venice, hotels like the Eden Hotel in Taiwan which has been decorated as the Bat Cave from The Dark Knight, and theme parks like Disneyworld where visitors can immerse themselves within scenes from the classic Magic Kingdom to The Wizarding World of Harry Potter.

Theming and imagineering practices are also used to engineer people (read: shape their thoughts and behaviours), both tourists (to meet their satisfaction and attracting them to

a particular destination), but also for locals (to bring them together). Continuing the practices, Islamic tourism has been chosen to highlight the implications of this niche theme strategy on the ground (imagineering) both as a way to promote tourism as well as to forge a collective identity for Malaysians. Perhaps, there is the question of how the Islamic tourism fit into the wider picture of tourism scene in Malaysia and promote Malaysia as “Truly Asia”. However, in the context of Islamic tourism I studied, I found a differing picture of how this multiculturalism is displayed especially when the attention is only on Islam and Muslim tourists.

Malaysia Islamic tourism draws a theme on specifically Malaysian religious resources (focussing on the way of Islamic life and its practices) and local strengths (ITC, 2015). This Islamic theme is imagineered onto tourist space by creating or capitalising upon the presence of (new) associated attractions (such as its mosques, Islamic art museums, shariah compliance hotel, educational, arts, heritage, and cultural festivals, health and wellness centre) as a way to develop the status of the country’s tourism industry (Paradis, 2004; Chang, 2005). By prescribing themes to tourism context, strong Muslim images, and experiences built upon the theme of the country’s national religion, as a way to attract Muslim and non-Muslim tourists. This argument is explored as the critique of the Islamic tourist sites such as mosques are viewed not only as a place of worship for Muslims but also as a medium of social actions that may encourage interactions between tourists and local people, as well as among the multiracial population. In line with the Malaysian Islamic tourism has highlights a two-pronged objective that is targeted both at tourists as well as for locals (ITC, 2015). First, Islamic tourism is conceptualised in Malaysia as a statement about what the country has to offer its Muslim and non-Muslim visitors. Second, for Malaysians, Islamic tourism seeks to forge deeper understanding, openness, and acceptance among other ethnic groups towards Islam, aimed at constantly maintaining ethnic coexistence.

There has been much literature on fantasy-based and themed places and spaces (e.g. Zukin, 1995; Paradis, 2004), relatively few studies emphasise theming based on Islamic as a new tourism niche product (see Al-Hamarnah and Steiner, 2004; Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2010; Bhuiyan et al., 2011; Jafari and Scott, 2014). Therefore, the main objective of the study is to extend the current literature on the subject by seeing Islamic tourism in Malaysia as more than just platforms through which theming and imagineering may lead to potentially contested by tourists but also investigate locals’ perceptions of how Islamic tourism has been implemented on the ground and how it change materially, socially and symbolically.

Methodologically, qualitative research methods were used to gather information through in-depth interviews with the two important groups of stakeholders; the direct stakeholders and indirect stakeholders. However, this paper focuses only on the perspective from the indirect stakeholders who are amongst the local Malaysians. The in-depth interview were conducted to gather the extent to which they understand the concept of Islamic tourism in Malaysia, and how this may impact their space and everyday lives especially when Islamic tourism is only focused on Islam and Muslim tourists. The ten local Malaysians in Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Selangor have been randomly approached and selected among three major ethnic groups in Malaysia; Malays, Chinese and Indians, to collect the different perspectives on the implementation of Islamic tourism in a multi-ethnicity country. It is very much based on the constructivist idea that different people may have different ideas about place especially when some individuals seek to impose their own thoughts on the place as the “right” one and this thus leads to contestation (Schwandt, 1994).

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of theming and imagineering first emerged out of the initiatives of the Walt Disney Company that responsible for the reproduction of unreal or mythical places. Themed reproductions of real or mythical places are often portrayed without warts (Archer, 1997). According to Paradis (2004), imagineering is the Disney practice of blending between creative imagination and engineering to create the reality of dreams by theming any goods, services, or places (Archer, 1997), so that visitors would be able to develop the memorable experiences of their visit. Basically, the main objective of theming is to create an imagination world for the visitors that give them a unique story and distinctive experience from their everyday life which intends to amaze them (Lukas, 2007).

As Lukas (2007) defines a theme represents a plot that highlights a specific attraction at a destination with a story created to support the imagination and thus, create the themed environments. While Yeoh and Teo (1996) explains theming as a repackaging of geographical areas or historical events onto a specific leisure site or environment where customers pay for particular goods and services that are linked to the specific themes of the venue. On the larger canvas, there can be many different themes and can be applied not only on specific enclosed areas, but they can be done over different scales such streets, within cities, or even the whole nation (Lukas, 2007) that are in line with the chosen image (Teo, 2003). Moreover, there are marketing themes which portray destination sites through slogans, catch phrases (Chang, 1997; Klenosky and Gitelson, 1997), theme parks (Yeoh, 2005; Zukin, 1995) which are developed with particular visual representations; and place themes (Hannigan, 1998; Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993) in which entire neighbourhoods, cities and even countries are infused with a strategic vision that guides overall development plans (Yeoh, 2005). From the theme park to the shop/café, to the city are examples of how theming and imagineering can be done at different scales. The theme park, according to Paradis (2004) defined theme park as an enclosed space that includes components “ingeniously tied together and promoted to the visitor as a coordinated package of attractions or facilities around a single theme”.

Tourism theming and imagineering process, however, can lead to many contestations as much as it has its benefits especially when there are the dominant discourse for the representation of culture in Malaysian society that still informed by Malays. Malay power is much more unsophisticated direct decision-making power where the top-down power attempts to make “place” like what they think it is benefits for all and also, there is the ways in which the people themselves make their “place”. The key idea from the top-down is the way in which places are usually constructed with particular objectives of tourism (Chang, 1997) and to spread of nationalism spirit among local (Anderson, 2006). Beyond this, theming and imagineering are very much an exercise in political processes, where the tourism stakeholders get to decide what the theme is and what should be included in it (Lukas, 2007). Chang (2005) has written, ‘this is the way in which placemaking reflects power within the context of tourism theming’. Many scholars argued that the politics of placemaking are the key to understating the activities of people and are produced by social structures that are saturated with power and thus, motivate their response to the socio-spatial and what represent to them (Massey, 1992). These powers can include contestation over discursive representation, or the terms of involvement and implementation (Massey, 1992). As the preeminent philosopher, Michel Foucault’s concepts of power and governmentality emphasised that power is something which operates through people, and not necessarily upon them. This pushes us to examine what ways in which niche tourism theme strategy may be politically driven in terms of the issues and contestations that emerge when theming and imagineering is implemented materially, socially and symbolically in the context of Malaysia. This could be a critical point of attention for top-down approach who often use

their decision-making power to create places for people and how locals may feel contrast about the place after the changes.

### **3. Analysis and Discussions**

Islamic tourism in Malaysia is basically a brainchild of Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MOTAC) as a new niche tourism product. To focus on the development of Malaysia's Islamic tourism, Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC) was established as the initiatives to market and promote Islamic tourism extensively (ITC, 2015). ITC sought to reconstruct the concept of Islamic tourism in Malaysia uniquely amongst other Islamic tourism destinations where Islamic tourism is not only limited to serving halal food for Muslim tourists and providing prayer facilities at tourist sites and public premises but also focusing on tourist sites and attractions, and the activities offer is more philosophical that includes the spiritual agenda. In fact, all these aspects in Islamic tourism are not only purposely for Malay-Muslims but also targeted to non-Muslims to participate as well. According to the ITC, Islamic tourism is defined as any activity, event and experience undertaken in a state of travel that is Islamically-compliant. This is meant for the purpose to have an interface within an Islamic framework, with one or all of the following; economy, culture, heritage, history, arts, a way of life, health, education and any other human activities.

Because the majority population in Malaysia are Muslim, the Islamic factor was used to attract the Muslim niche market. As a Muslim country and Muslim is a majority population, the mosques and halal restaurants are almost everywhere because Muslims in Malaysia share almost similar culture and way of life with other Muslim tourists and this gives facilities to tourists when they travel to Malaysia. Malaysia aims to capitalise on the diversity of attractions to attract tourists. For example, Islamic festivals such as Maulidur Rasul, Ramadhan and Islamic-Malay cultures such as Malay wedding, *cukur jambul*, and *aqiqah* have been capitalised upon and repackaged in the Islamic tourism package in alluring cultural experience to tourists (Director of Islamic Tourism Centre, 2015).

Additionally, Malaysia has a very positive image as a Muslim country, safe to travel, and diversity in ethnic and culture, and consequently gives a positive perception of tourist towards Malaysia itself and Islamic tourism (Butler, 2014). Most of the respondents have perceived the concept of Islamic tourism positively as Islamic tourism could do for the country's economy, culture, religion, and society. For them, Malaysia has a huge potential to develop Islamic tourism comprehensively along with to boost the tourist arrivals to Malaysia.

Islamic tourism is a symbol of Islam that represents Malaysia as a Muslim country. Having Islamic tourism will be part of tourism product and will enrich foreign Muslim tourists to experience Malaysia in an Islamic way especially in the current world issues – Hikmi.

Malaysia has a potential for developing the Islamic tourism per se. Malaysia is one of the countries in this world where public prayer facilities and halal foods are readily available almost everywhere, and this benefit for us too indirectly – Dianah.

There are several factors contributing to the rise of Islamic tourism in Malaysia; capitalising on global trends and local strengths, facilitating domestic tourism, as an extension of theming strategy and strengthening national identity.

For the past 10 years, the trend of incorporating religion and being more conscious about what is allowed and not allowed by Islam has been growing. Muslims throughout the world have become one of the largest consumer groups whereas they concerned about the halal food, their finances, the medical treatment they receive is permitted or not. This awareness has created a new ideology of consumerism where the Islamic component which demonstrates the trend of people looking for Islamic alternatives, for something more acceptable in the eye of the religion - Director of Islamic Tourism Centre, 2015.

This state of the religion that persists today is concerned with improving a quality of life through focusing on cultural (Henderson, 2009) and comprehensive economic development (Battour and Ismail, 2016). This emerges as a legitimate space where a Malay may retain his/her character of Muslim while engaging in a cosmopolitan environment (Singh, 2001). This also stands at the forefront of the conceptualisation, production and marketing of goods and services in compliance with Islamic law, including Islamic tourism (Al-Hamarneh and Steiner, 2004).

Despite the multi-ethnic concern brought up by the several non-Muslim respondents, there is a strong link between the objectives of Islamic tourism and national unity in a contemporary Malaysia. Islamic tourism can be seen as a valuable platform for the engineering of societies - for constructing a more cohesive nation through tourism as many assumed that tourists are attracted to visit Malaysia due to the religious and cultural diversity, and the social stability. This is invariably the case of Islamic tourism which Islamic tourism can be used as more than just a tourism tool but for binding Malaysians together as envisioned by ITC.

While respondents strongly supported the ideas of Islamic tourism as an opportunity to promote ethnic harmony in Malaysia, Tashmeera realised that tourism and ethnicity share a close relationship in which the Malaysian government determines the ethnic society in tourism marketing and promoting over the years. As a result, Islamic tourism has been chosen as an exemplary model of how multi-ethnicity society accepts other differences in the context of tourism. A similar account was also made by Manjeet, viewing that the minority group may accept the concept of Islamic tourism in Malaysia if Islamic tourism does not only offer to Muslims but also benefits other races to experience it. Besides, it can be said that despite the demographic challenge of Malaysia, since Independence, has been in a state of “stable tension”, which means that Malaysians have been living in a society dominated by many contradictions but we have managed to solve most of them through a continuous process of consensus seeking negotiations. However, in contrast, this could be seen as a critique of how ITC actually sees the implementation of Islamic tourism as benefiting and appealing all races in Malaysia without realising that minority group may feel otherwise, as acknowledged by Yilin and Loo Wee:

I don't know if Islamic tourism could benefit other races; Chinese and India. They may not mind about the rise of Islamic tourism but they may not want Islamic tourism to be prominent in Malaysia tourism industry - Yilin

Some ethnic may perceive that Islamic tourism heavily biased only to Islam and Malay-Muslim. How can you have Islamic tourism that includes all religions although, in terms of intentions, the state has got it right in terms of seeing how Islamic tourism can benefit all Malaysians even its focus on just the Islamic religion, right? This may become a major source of discontent - Loo Wee

Critically, the minority group did not see their races as being represented in tourism strategies. This could be a clash between themes as argues by Lukas (2007), the top-down have the spatial power to decide what the theme is fit and what should be included in it although facets of place that does not align with the theme. It could be that while ITC sees the value of Islamic tourism for all Malaysians and have the power to decide to what happens in society and thus they are wary of how to implement it. It seems that Islamic tourism does not necessarily represent only Islam and Malay-Muslim but ITC attempted to make everything to equal for all races because selecting any tourist attractions that appropriately represent Malaysia always remains a complicated issue (Butler et al., 2014). In this situation, we could refer to the disagreement among communally conscious groups over the allocation of cultural resources. It is evident from the colonial experience, the political power is in the hands of the British which is communally based, in the hands of the dominant Malay community (Din, 1982). At this point, the defining principles of Islamic tourism decision include a partnership comprising political elites, decision-making based on ethnic proportionality and purposive depoliticisation of the political process (Din, 1982).

Another concern in this study lies on how the sites are socially and spatially regulated or changed and the range of activities has been changed during the process of the implementation of Islamic tourism and thus, it causes certain restriction.

There are people who sleep in the mosques and wear inappropriate clothing. I also saw many activities in the mosque nowadays. The tourists had strolled around the mosque and taken photographs. Sometimes they are with the guard, and sometimes they tour themselves - Haziq

There is a need to see how Islamic tourism changes the space through the mosque tourism as an example, as this must not be seen as limited to the only religious matter, but rather as multi-functional. The mosque is widely used by local Muslims not just as a place to perform prayers but also to meet and stroll around while watching international tourists after the mosque start open it to tourists.

Nur Diyana also shared the same views on how important local behaviour is in representing tourist space especially the Muslims who sometimes do not possess their good attitude as a Muslim. She proceeded to say: 'I saw a mosque guard yells at the one tourist because he did not take off his shoes. The inappropriate attitude of untrained workers could tarnish the pure image of Islam without they realised it'. The sentiments here really bring home the point that Jafari and Scott (2014) made on how important the image of Islam after being themed in the eyes of tourists to see how Islam has been practising into contemporary society in Malaysia whereas the Malay-Muslim has become the main subject.

There are some changes in terms of regulations to the Muslim and the tourists especially after the mosque being part in tourism programs. A little space inside the prayer hall has provided to tourist to taking pictures and most of the time, they make noise and a bit disturbing to those who want to perform prayers - Hikmi

One of the great challenges in the implementation of Islamic tourism has an influence on Malaysian multi-ethnicity, on their space and on their practice of that space may consider as a source of ethnic conflicts. Ironically, Malaysia is a multiracial country and not all policies adopt Islamic law (Din, 1982). As it said, it is difficult to draw clear lines in terms of how things are finally implemented on the ground in the case as such Malaysia.

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to examine the purpose of engineering the society is to seeing how people from various ethnic and race background bind together and link them to their terrains, although there is the ideological exercises are often times contested by the very people they seek to depict. Besides, it fosters the nation-building and also ensuring the Chinese and Indians has a place for showcasing their culture as well. More than this, the state introduced Islamic tourism as a new niche product in order to capitalise Malaysian's strength and global demand for tourism. Islamic tourism has been chosen as an example of niche theme to explore on how the engineering of spatial according to Islamic theme is also meant to achieve the objectives of engineering of societies within the plural society context. Although Islamic tourism promotes the dominant religion in Malaysia and thus not representing the religions of all Malaysians, the cultures and religions of other races are also promoted under different themes such as in the imagineering efforts of the "Malaysia, Truly Asia". This theme review on how Malaysia is opted to "selling" its tremendous multi-ethnicity to represent the country's uniqueness without undermining the minority. The contestation between presenting an ethnically diverse and a homogenous and Malay-centric self-image remains a dilemma (Singh, 2001; Din, 1982). As ethnically diverse societies have the tendency for fragmentation and contestation, and as a tool of socio-political socialization have gradually lost effectiveness, Islamic tourism has arguably emerged and introduced as a privileged tool for Malaysia to disseminate a shared religion identity with their people. Malay-Muslim had established their dominant culture and identity and thus, making their position as a strong political instrument in the decision-making power. In this regards, not only are cultural ideology, they can be highly contentious, where spatialized representations of culture may seek to divide among other ethnic, rather than unite, populations.

#### 5. Acknowledgement

The author is grateful to Dr. Hamzah Muzaini at Wageningen University for his guidance, keenness to share his knowledge and provided me with the important comments. Also thanks to Islamic Tourism Center (ITC) for their information and cooperation.

#### 6. References

- Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, C., 2004. Islamic Tourism: Rethinking the Strategies of Tourism Development in the Arab World after September 11, 2001. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24(1) pp.173-182.
- Anderson, B., 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: *Verso Books*.
- Archer, K., 1997. The Limits to the Imagineered City: Sociospatial Polarization in Orlando. *Economic Geography*, 73(3) pp.322-336.
- Battour, M., & Ismail, M. N., 2016. Halal Tourism: Concepts, Practises, Challenges and Future. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 19(Part B) pp.150-154.
- Bhuiyan, M. A. H., Siwar, C., Ismail, S. M., Islam, R., & Ehsan, D., 2011. Potentials of Islamic Tourism: A Case Study of Malaysia on East Coast Economic Region. *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 5(6) pp.1333-1340.
- Butler, G., Khoo-Lattimore, C., & Mura, P., 2014. Heritage Tourism in Malaysia: Fostering a Collective National Identity in an Ethnically Diverse Country. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 19(2), pp.199-218.
- Chang, T. C., 1997. From "Instant Asia" to "Multi-faceted Jewel": Urban Imaging Strategies and Tourism Development in Singapore. *Urban Geography*, 18(6) pp.542-562.

- Chang, T. C., 2005. Place, Memory and Identity: Imagining 'New Asia'. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 46(3) pp.247-253.
- Din, K.H., 1982. Tourism in Malaysia: Competing Needs in a Plural Society. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 9(3) pp.453- 480.
- Islamic Tourism Centre (ITC), 2015. Annual Report 2014. Islamic Tourism Centre, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia.
- Klenosky, D. B., and Gitelson, R. E., 1997. Characteristics of Effective Tourism Promotion Slogans. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24(1) pp.235-238.
- Kotler, P.; Haider, D. H. and Rein, I., 1993. *Marketing Places*. New York: The Free Press.
- Lukas, S. A. ed., 2007. *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self*. United States: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Massey, D., 1992. Politics and Space/Time. *New Left Review*, 196, pp.65-69.
- Muzaini, H., 2016. Informal Heritage-Making at the Sarawak Cultural Village, East Malaysia. *Tourism Geographies*, 19(2) pp.244-264.
- Paradis, T. W., 2004. Theming, Tourism, and Fantasy City. A Companion to Tourism. *Blackwell Publishing*, 195(5) pp.97-112.
- Singh, H., 2001. Ethnic Conflict in Malaysia Revisited. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 39(1) pp.42-65.
- Teo, P., 2003. Limits of Imagineering: A Case Study of Penang. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(3) pp.545-563.
- Yeoh, B. S., 2005. The Global Cultural City. Spatial Imagineering and Politics in the (Multi) Cultural Marketplaces of South-east Asia. *Urban Studies*, 42(5-6) pp.945-958.
- Zamani-Farahani, H., & Henderson, J. C., 2010. Islamic Tourism and Managing Tourism Development in Islamic Societies: The Cases of Iran and Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 12(1) pp.79-89.
- Zukin, S., 1995. *The Cultures of Cities* (Vol. 150). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.