

Staging Malay Hospitality Among Women's Homestay Operators in Penang Island: An Anthropological Perspectives

Farah Syazwani Hayrol Aziz &
Nor Hafizah Selamat

Centre for Research on Women and Gender
(KANITA)

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Corresponding e-mail: farah.hayrolaziz@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Tourism has been considered as a big part of the hospitality industry. Hospitality refers to the relationship process between a guest and a host, and the act or practice of being hospitable. Anthropological literature considered hospitality like gift-giving which involves reciprocity, a negotiation between spontaneity and calculation, generosity and friendship. Although, it has been widely established that women have been the main player in hospitality industry particularly in rural tourism, little is known on the role of women in managing and staging of 'hospitality'. This study is to explore the managing and staging 'Malay Hospitality' by a group of women's homestay operators on the Penang Island. Using gender perspective, the concept of 'Malay hospitality'

as constructed by the respondents will be explored and how it involves the process of negotiation, calculation and reconstruction. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with ten women's homestay operators. The study revealed that staging 'Malay hospitality' requires the host to be attentive to guest's need, from privacy issue, to providing them with basic needs, amenities, loving and care. The preparation of meals is used as a space for bonding, a critical aspect in providing what is called as "Malay hospitality". The findings conclude that the women in homestay programme played an important role in not only sustaining the homestay operations but also the sustainability of rural tourism industry on the island. The article concludes with tourism policy and management implication and derives

questions for further research.

Keywords: *Malay hospitality, staging hospitality, gender perspective, women's homestay operators, authenticity, anthropology*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an ever-growing industry worldwide, and it has continued to grow and becoming the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world. These dynamics have turned tourism into a key driver for socio-economic progress. Tourism has been considered as a big part of the hospitality industry. A successful hospitality industry must depend on successful tourism management and marketing. Authenticity and hospitality is significant in tourism study as it concerns the aspects of everyday life,

language, food and rituals practiced by a particular community. According to Bruner (1994), authenticity means “originals, as opposed to a copy”, and he adds that no reproduction is equal to original whereas hospitality is functioned by establishing a relationship or to promote an already established relationship (Selwyn, 2001). However, while looking for authenticity, tourists might accept what is called as staged authenticity, a substitute for the original (Cohen, 1988). The association between experiencing authenticity and act of hospitality is therefore used in this study to understand homestay program from a gender perspective. In Malaysia, the concept of hospitality is often referred by homestay operators as “services” and is also considered as the most important tourism asset in ensuring that tourist can experience the authenticity of homestay experience.

Malaysian homestay programme is considered an iconic rural tourism product that involves the staging of Malay traditional way of life and emphasising the authenticity of Malay hospitality. As mentioned in the official website of Malaysia Travel, homestay in a traditional village or “kampung” is the fastest and easiest ways to experience ‘the real Malaysia’. This study adopted the constructivist approach, as argued by Wang (1999), to explore how authenticity through the staging of Malay hospitality of Malaysian homestay programme is constructed by women homestay operators. Based on constructivist

approach, tourists are always in search of authenticity but instead of looking for objective authenticity, tourists are searching for symbolic authenticity which is the result of social construction (Wang, 1999). A substantial research has been conducted on women’s involvement in rural tourism such as homestay most of these studies focused solely on the management of the homestay without using gender lens. This study attempts to address this gap by focusing on the role of women in constructing authenticity and performing hospitality services, and how tourists perceived the authenticity of the visited place and the type of hospitality they received from hosts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cohen (1988) suggested that originality refers to the modern value, in which it is closely related to the impact of modernity. It also means something authentic and truthful. MacCannell (1973) who was one of the first scholars to introduce the concept of originality in the study of motivation and travel experiences, argues that contemporary traveler’s mission is not only to meet their satisfaction, but also to seek ‘authenticity’. However, he argues that this finding is not determined by the quality of a search, but more on how travelers affected by tour operators, tour guides, promotions, and advertising. On his concept of “staged authenticity”, he argues that most of authenticity has been staged to create an impression of authenticity for

a tourist audience. He also argues that modern humans see that people nowadays do not have the existential value and therefore must look for it elsewhere, either in the community or society outside of their culture.

MacCannell (1973) also criticised the way how tourist can experience authenticity as most encounter pseudo experiences. His concept of “staged authenticity” refers to the staging of local culture to create an impression of authenticity for a tourist audience. He argues that the process of tourist development, incoming a huge number of tourists may lead to the creation of “back stage areas” where locals continue meaningful traditions away from the gaze of tourists with the aim to protect their own culture from being gazed upon for tourist consumption. However, the meaning and experiences of authenticity may be perceived differently by different people. Therefore, Wang (1999) has distinguished authenticity into three categories: objective, constructive and existential authenticity. Objective authenticity refers to visitors who wanted to see objects that are ‘real’ and not being staged for the benefit of tourists. Meanwhile, constructive authenticity is the result of social construction. The experience is said to be authentic if tourists feel so. The last one is existential authenticity, a condition induced by tourist activities. In other words, existential authenticity can have nothing to do with the authenticity of toured objects.

Scholars have argued that through tourism, the role of women becomes significant as they can break through from their stereotyped domestic role at home (Kinnaird et al., 1994). Homestay, for example, has been argued to be a pro-women tourism opportunity as it promotes sustainable community development by fostering gender equality (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013). However, studies also show that women in tourism were mostly concentrated in the lowest paid or lowest skilled sectors of the industry, while carrying out a large amount of unpaid work, part time job, particularly in family tourism businesses. Despite many studies have been done on Malaysian homestay programme, not much is known how the local Malay Muslim women homestay operators plays a vital role in constructing and staging what is called as 'Malay hospitality'. Their role which often underrated, is the sustainer of the local hospitality industry. Hence, in the case of women in homestay programme, the questions how women involved in the process of staging authenticity and hospitality is still left unexplored.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In studying a social phenomenon such as the construction of authenticity and hospitality performances, qualitative methods are recommended, and hence used in this study. Data is collected based on a total of ten in-depth interviews with the homestay operators and tourists who visited the homestay village in Penang

Island. Participant observation were also carried out to observe situations that informants have described in interviews as well as events that informants may be unable or unwilling to share. This is important to make the researcher aware of distortions or inaccuracies in description provided by those informants (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

For the purpose of this study, a homestay village name Pulau Aman was chosen to carry out the study of the homestay operators and the tourists who visited the island. There are about nine homestay that are registered with the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia in Penang Island. However, according to the statistic of Penang Island Homestay from the year 2009 to 2014, Pulau Aman homestay has the highest total income among the other. It has several attractions that are unique to the tourists who visited the village. According to statistic given by the Chief Villagers, the whole population of the village consists of 254 people: 117 men and 134 women. It has around 56 households in total. Even though the population is considerably small, the village do have a strong community-based organisation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Pulau Aman which also means the "island of Peace" is a small island in Penang that is home to a traditional Malay village. It is a fishing village with most people on the island are elderly folks. To outsiders, the people of the island seem to be living a simple yet traditional

lifestyle. Some of the popular activities among tourists on the island is fishing, water sports, homestays, and jungle trekking. However, the island is most famous of its mee udang (prawn mee) specialty. Pulau Aman is occupied by Malay Muslim, thus the concept of hospitality through the Islamic teachings can be observed throughout the village. The Malay traditional culture with the simple life can be observed in Pulau Aman.

Traditional Malay House

In homestay programme, traditional Malay house is one of the important elements of Malay authentic experience. Traditional Malay house is claimed to be part of Malaysian heritage value and neglecting this cultural value of one's home will cause the country to lose its sense of place. According to Zulkifli (2000), Malay houses are built by emphasising the functions and needs of each space depending on space suitability. Malay traditional house often seen being decorated with ornaments, real plants, fragrant plants to add its aesthetic value to the home environment. The type of decorations and plants that grown around the house can also be influenced by certain beliefs (Zulkifli, 2000). In Pulau Aman, one of the significant views of the village is its Malay traditional house. Majority of houses on the island are built on stilts to suit the weather and soil condition, to withstand the salty water, particularly during the high tide season. Despite the rapid process of development and modernisation, Sanusi, 55 years old, the chief village, is

firmly believe that the island is still "safe from the invasion of modernity as we are all lived in traditional Malay houses". He believes that to stage "Malay hospitality element" for tourists is to showcase their Malay traditional houses. Sharifah (53), another homestay operator, said "...we will make sure our home clean and nice. My husband did his bit by helping to make a small renovation of the guest room so that all the stuff needed are ready for the guests. I would not be happy if they [guests] make complaint."

Hospitality at Home

One of the important aspects of Malay hospitality is to prepare and provide food for their guest. Malay traditional dishes are preferred though not necessarily enjoyed by the tourists. But the presentation of the food and the way it was lay out is something represent the Malay culture. Being a homestay hosts, women in Pulau Aman must perform a vital role in catering for guest's need and giving good services. The women did all the planning, buying the cooking stuff, preparing the food, and presenting the food on the table and entertaining the guest through the process of eating together. The hosts invited the guests to having breakfast either at their home, or at a prepared setting, which usually takes place at the hall. A matching set of dining table accessories were neatly presented on top of a table that has been lined with proper tablecloth. For breakfast time, the usual menu would be local delicacies such as Nasi Lemak,

Fried Noodle, in addition to a spread of Malay dessert and local cakes (*kuih-muih*). All these types of local cakes were selected because they believed that these represented the local authentic Malay food, served usually during breakfast.

Meals are mostly served on a table but in some houses, it was served on the floor mat or carpet in the living hall. For the lunch meals, the menu would consist of rice, several dishes (fish or chicken curry), cakes and desserts. If the hosts were entertaining international guests from abroad, the elements of Malay's community hospitality will be further explained to them while indulging the meals. The aspects' explained includes eating and drinking manners with right hand, reciting prayers and washing hands before savouring the meals. The women's host have been tasked to explain how the food were served, the proper attire or dress to be worn in the house and prayer times for the host. According to Maria, most of the guests who came from overseas were excited to learn how to eat using their own hands rather than using the usual spoon and fork. Maria said that majority of her guests were very accepting of the Malay food and in fact was quite excited to try out local food such as curry chicken, spicy sambal other local Malay salads. Guest would usually opt for traditional Malay food and they would request for traditional Malay dish for lunch and dinner to Maria when they do the booking. Maria will prepare the home cooked meal for them and ask their feedback to suit their taste.

She would try to prepare meal that considered 'authentic' from her own perceptions but will alter the menu based on the feedback from her guests.

Therefore, the authenticity of the meals prepared will be negotiated based on the response from her guests. However, according to Maria, most of her guests were quite adventurous by willing to try out the meals that are 'unfamiliar' to her guests. Azad, from Kurdistan shared her experience with local Malay food,

"My food experience is quite amazing here because I love the food. It was a little bit spicy, but I try to enjoy. The nasi lemak is quite special, I think. Even though it is spicy, the taste was nice, it was very delicious. The food served was special with different colors and different way of presentation." (Azad, 32)

Negotiating authentic meals

The preparation and the staging of 'authentic meals' is not a one-way process at it involved the process of negotiations between the host and the guest. Hence, the staging of hospitality and authenticity can be challenging. Although the homestay operators understand they have to provide as what is called as authentic meals to their guest, how authentic the food should be served need to be negotiated with tourists. For guest who stayed in homestay, they would usually pay the package which includes the meals with the host family. Depending on

the prior agreement made, the preparation of food for the guest may take place at the communal hall, together with some of the committee members of Women's Association. If the number of participants is not that many, most homestay operators will prepare home-cooked meals in their own home. Sometimes when the number is too many, preparing daily meals will be done at community hall which involving all homestay owners that are involved in the programme.

As one of the homestay operators, Zalina, aged 37, revealed, they cannot be authentic all the time as they must adapt the food with the guest's taste and desire. For example, although, dried fish is considered as traditional food and should be 'authentic' food, the women were reluctant to serve the dried fish as not all tourists like the smell of it. Sometimes, the preparation of 'authentic' food needs to be negotiated due to the limitation of time and human resource. Zalina, for example, prefers to prepare the meal for tourists, like the one she prepares for her family. In her case, the menu selection does not necessarily represent of what is called as the 'local traditional dish' but more to something practical for her family due to lack of resources. Zalina has three small children at home that needed more attention. Therefore, having the same menu for her guests and family will save her cost, energy, and time in the kitchen. As a mother and homestay operator, she not only had to take care of the guests and their needs, but also

the needs of her children and family. The balance between housework and taking care of children and at the same time managing the homestay business can add extra burden to the women.

"Eating together" - Building the intimate 'bond'

The role of women in staging 'Malay hospitality' is not confined to preparing the food and making sure that their guests' needs are fulfilled but more important in homestay business is the creation of 'intimate bonding'. This is especially manifested when the women, as host, took an extra effort to create the bond with their guests by inviting them to join them in the kitchen, preparing the meals together. Asking their guests to join them in the kitchen is also an activity to showcase how the Malay meals are prepared. The warmth atmosphere created during this process will lead to the process of intimacy between the host and the guest. The food is not only prepared together but also will be eaten together. Carsten (1995) in her work on Langkawi Island argues how food is used to construct relatedness and kin ties. According to Janowski and Kerlogue (2007), food that is eaten together by groups of people either on an everyday basis or at less frequent and often more lavish and festive occasions are important in constructing ties between those who share food. Sarimah, another homestay operator shared that the feeling of uneasiness and anxiousness from the expectation of her guests suddenly disappeared

when they started cooking and preparing the food together. Sarimah admits that she loves talking to her guests, sharing stories about their families and lives in general. "We normally will talk during mealtime...eat and talk" said Sarimah. This bonding moments made the visit very special, as some of her guests are still in touch with her.

However, different strategies have been adopted by the more senior members of homestay operators. Haminah, Ramlah and Saodah, all are in their 70s revealed that sometimes the 'bonding process' would be delegated to their children who were almost the same age as their hosts. The fact that their children can speak better English has made the process of bonding much easier. Saodah, for example, would prepare the meals while her daughter would entertain her guests, answering her guests' curiosity. In this case, it is quite significant how the female members, not the male members of the family will be much more involved in the homestay business. The only aspect involved by the male members of the family in the whole homestay experience is involving activities outside the house such as transporting the guests by using motorbike to events that are organized outside the house. In terms of preparing food, the homestay hosts seem very conscious about what their guests' response if they serve meals that are considered as "simple" food. For Saodah, simple meal means preparing foods that are easily made and accessible such as dried fish, fried

anchovies, or fried egg. A more elaborate dish, according to Saodah would be using fresh seafood such as fish, prawns, or clams.

DISCUSSION

From the described tours above, the construction of authentic experiences in Pulau Aman are related extremely well to Wang's notion of "constructive authenticity". Constructive authenticity means that the concept is a result of social construction (Wang, 1999). Objects, sites, and settings have been presented to appear authentic. They are not necessarily real or genuine, but they are constructed by a point of view or belief of a culture (Wang, 1999). In this case, culture is constantly "making itself up", and marketers and advertisers. Majority of tourist claimed that 'Malay hospitality' as experienced by them is characterized by a close-relationship between host-guest, an experience that is seen as 'authentic' as they never experience it before. Even for the local tourists who are familiar with Malay culture views their homestay experience as different from their own experience growing up in their own villages. From the constructivist point of view, tourists are in search of authenticity. However, they are not after objective authenticity but symbolic authenticity which is the result of social construction (Wang, 1999).

In relations to the intimacy constructed between the host and the guest through eating together with the family has been perceived by tourists

as something authentic. The way food is prepared and consumed has given them a different perspective. Although, the host admitted that some menu did not really represent the 'traditional menu' and therefore not authentic, tourist did not seem to be bothered with the meals served. They view authentic experience is more on the way food is made, presented and consumed. They learned the experience of making the meals together with their host' as something authentic. Horner (1993) has argued the importance of authenticity lies in the personal relationship the tourist expresses through their 'making it together' and not based on the authenticity of dishes prepared. The relationship and intimacy constructed through the 'cooking' process is considered the most authentic experience. For local tourists, they are still considered the experience as authentic as some of them have never been on the island before. Therefore, having to be able to "get away" from their normal routine lives is some sort of escapism from their active life in the normal day of work. The discussion above highlights the staging of Malay hospitality and its authentic presentation as showcased by the homestay operators.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this article is to explore the roles of women in the homestay business in constructing authentic experience and hospitality services. As has been presented and discussed, the staging of 'Malay hospitality' requires the

women as host to be attentive to guest's need, from privacy issue, to providing them with basic needs, amenities, loving and care. Women devoted most of their time to prepare, to greet and entertain and cater tourists' needs. The preparation of meals is used as a space for bonding, a critical aspect in providing what is called as "Malay hospitality". The findings revealed that the women's homestay operators played an important role in not only sustaining the homestay operations but also the sustainability of rural tourism industry on the island.

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