



Journey of Indigenous Knowledge for Sustainable Livelihood: Story from East Coast, Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper addresses the situation and issues regarding indigenous knowledge among the Malay community at the Eastern Coast of the Peninsular Malaysia. The tacit knowledge of this community and knowledge sharing potentials the indigenous population is explored. The paper examines the opportunities of the members of the community to ascend into the economic mainstream and improve their quality of lives through participation in the industry based on their indigenous knowledge. Some suggestions are incorporated in the paper to yield a conceptual framework of tools for the agencies as support system to build a sustainable livelihood and heritage preservation of the rural community.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Sustainable Livelihood, Knowledge Transfer

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1.0 Introduction

Indigenous knowledge (IK), Traditional Knowledge (TK) and Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) are three different sources of intellectual capital. There bears similarities that they are generally referred to as matured- long-standing traditions and practices of certain regional, indigenous, or local communities. It also encompasses the wisdom, knowledge, belief and teachings of these communities. In most situation these knowledge has been orally passed for generations from person to person. Some forms of them are expressed through stories, legends, folklore, rituals, songs and even laws (Acharya and Shrivastava, 2008).

The indigenous people use their knowledge to interpret their relationship with the local environment. Indigenous knowledge is a holistic approach of management of natural resources with conservation and sustainability as the core values. Among the Malay social capital, indigenous knowledge considers the spiritual values (religion and customary), *ilmu kebatinan* (metaphysics), natural science and competency in utilizing the adaptive process of change and social control. Indigenous knowledge bonds the community in a normative contract (see Figure 1.2). Traditionally, they are known to be capable and skilled in the arts and crafts of wood, bamboo and metal, as well pottery, *batik* printing, *songket* weaving and so forth. In this paper we are going to investigate a particularly unique Malay craft: the **keris**.

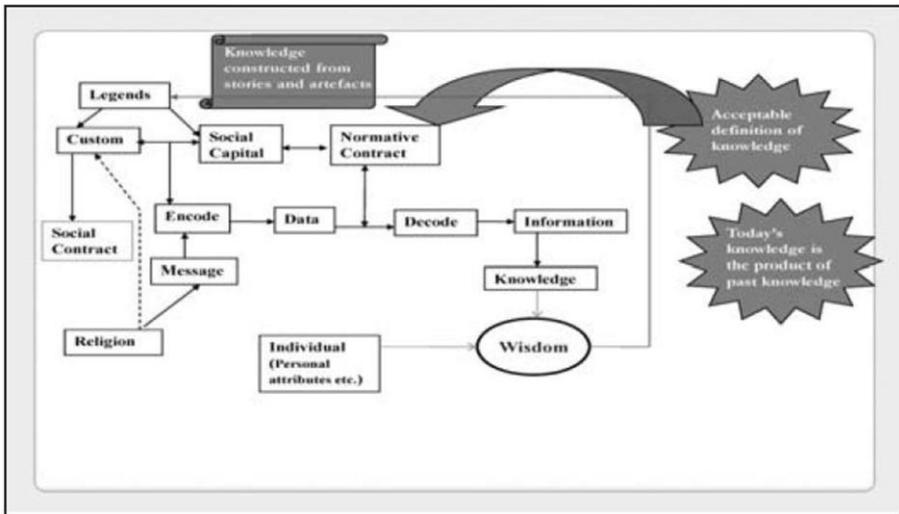


Figure 1.2: The journey of Indigenous Knowledge

In this context of research, indigenous knowledge is a composite but holistic set of know-how, expertise, skills derived from different sources, such as the parents, indigenous experts (elders), empirical trials and even scientific information. Indigenous knowledge

appears as encoded messages and value-laden, while scientific knowledge is dependent on tests. Both are not always perfect, yet useful and should not be rejected in entirety. Indigenous knowledge involves experiential learning process, in itself is scientific, but yet to be explored and documented.

The Perspective of Sustainable Livelihood Approach

Sustainable livelihood approach is defined as compromising the capabilities, assets, including both material and social resources and activities required as the means of living. A Sustainable livelihoods approach identifies poverty as a condition of insecurity or vulnerability to stresses and shocks, rather than merely lack of wealth. This approach also believes that one should maintain or enhance capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (Hossain, 2005; Meikle and Bannister, 2003).

The livelihood framework captures all the dimension of poverty in the perspectives of the poor themselves. This is contrast from the poverty indicator that measures poverty based on the household consumption. Hossain (2005) argues that poverty is not solely means a low income, but the livelihood framework has integrated a broader concept of deprivation and insecurity. Deprivation means when someone is unable to reach the certain level of functioning or capability. Chambers (1983, 1989), as cited in Hossain, (2005) argues that poverty includes physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness in addition to the lack of income and assets. However, in livelihood framework, poverty is characterized as not only lack of assets and inability to accumulate it, but the lack of choice with alternative coping strategies that enable them to survive but not to improve their welfare.

In the rural sector, the households might not have cash or savings but they may have other assets or capital such as health, knowledge and skills, friends and family and natural resources around them in order to survive and improve their well beings and livelihoods. The livelihoods concepts consists of the multiple household strategies in which the households engage to ensure their survival in the rural environment.

2.0 Methodology

For this particular research, the study involves examining existing secondary data as well as through the collecting primary data. We utilized the technique for collecting Indigenous Knowledge via documentation of what people do and why, within the large framework of what they know and think (Brookfield, 1996). From the primary data perspective, the researchers use the direct observation and semi-structured interview with the experts who are directly involved in the making of *keris* and interviews of government officials from respective agencies.

The researchers used secondary data such as from published texts including books, monograph and journals, Government Publications, comprised of the Relevant Acts passed by the Parliament, Government Economic Plan, surveys, handbooks from the

agencies etc. and other publications from annual reports, seminar papers, memoranda etc. Studies from other countries will be used as references for theoretical framework and techniques of implementation. These resources have provided comparatively different dimensions of the subjects under study.

Setting

This research was conducted on the East Coast States of Peninsular Malaysia. The selected Kelantan and Terengganu based on their significance as the cultural centre of the Malays in Malaysia. The two states are known as the Malay enclave, in which the community has continued to actively maintain and nurture a variety of traditional know-how such as blacksmiths, weavers embroidered, batik, wooden boat makers and others. Taking into account there are many aspects of indigenous knowledge which can be studied in both these states, the researchers decided to give special attention to the traditional knowledge, which is increasingly forgotten, that is weapon pageantry.

In order to obtain a clear and honest answer on this issue, researchers visited the site and conduct a direct observation of the experts at work as well as interviews. This method is very helpful to the researchers in order to explore and understand the real problems faced by the craftsmen. The location of the sites in the two states was identified based on the information obtained from the Perbadanan Kraftangan Malaysia, in Kelantan and Terengganu branches. For the weapon pageantry in Kelantan, the experts and their workshop is located at Kampung Tendong in Pasir Mas, which is about 20km from Kota Bharu. This village been chosen as one of the Craft Village by Perbadanan Kraftangan Malaysia Kelantan. The village is also designated as the site for "Satu Daerah Satu Industri" (SDSI) by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). In Terengganu, a sole individual is still active and involved in making the traditional metal work. He lives in Kampung Padang Bual, Pasir Akar, Besut, which is about 15 km from the Jertih town.

Profile of the Respondents

The following is a brief of respondents whom are involved in this study. The first respondent is Rusdi who is from Kampung Padang Bual, Jertih. He is 46 years old and blessed with a family of a wife and nine children between the ages of one to 17 years. His involvement in the weapon pageantry started when he was fifteen years old. He operates in an old barn in front of his house. According to Rusdi the proceeds from this small business could be translated in a form that is able to sustain the livelihood of his family. The product of his fine arts is well known not only in Terengganu and Kelantan, but also to the whole country and Singapore.

The second respondent in this study is a craftsman and businessman named Sulaiman who live in Kampung Tendong, Pasir Mas, Kelantan. This 65 years old craftsman is married and is blessed with five children. Sulaiman's skill is making *keris*. Today, he has diversified into iron works, which focus on the production of goods such as agricultural machete, hoes and others. He runs a small business with capital assistance from the Perbadanan Kraftangan Malaysia of Kelantan, which has financed the construction of his workshops near his house. Although the trade has somewhat battered his life, he

continues to work diligently in the business. According to Sulaiman, as the result of his effort, he is able to send his children to the universities. We also interviewed two dealers who specialized in selling metal crafts of Malay traditional weapons in Kelantan. They are Cikgu Daud and Cikgu Nasir.

3.0 Findings

3.1 The Craftsmen's Knowledge Sharing

Rusdi's Story

Rusdi hailed from generations of craftsmen. His grandfather was a *keris* craftsman. The talent skipped his father, however. Therefore he learned about the making of *keris* from several craftsmen in Besut. His *guru* has all passed away. He asserts that the time he took to enable him to master this skill is between 5 to 7 years. After he believed that he has become an expert, decided to engage as full-time craftsman. He has been in this business for 25 years. He claims that this is the only source of income that he obtains to support his household expenses and everyday life. Rusdi laments that *keris* making is a dying business. He maintains that in Besut, there is hardly anyone else still interested in *keris* making. The challenges were too great and others "*mengalah*" (given up). His colleagues who learned together with him have cut themselves off from the trade and are more comfortable looking for other job as artisans for houses, or village's odd-job workers.

The problem is not that the product has little financial value. It is actually the opposite. A *keris* can fetch a price of RM5,000 for a simple design and up to hundreds of thousands. Rusdi claims that recently one of his *keris* was bought by a Singaporean collector at RM25,000. He reiterates that he makes *keris* for himself, therefore it matters to him that the product is of the most satisfactory quality. Yet, he gets no support or financial assistance from the government.

Sulaiman's Story

At Pasir Mas, Kelantan Sulaiman has a different story to tell. He has once collaborated with the *Perbadanan Kraftangan Malaysia* Kelantan to train some young people who were showing interest to engage in iron works. During the training, they received allowances from the government. Out of the five people who came to have lessons with him for almost six months, however, no one has entered into the business as a profession. They never took the tasks seriously. As such, Sulaiman felt it was a waste of quality time trying to teach them, as he has to forgo orders from customers. He asserts that it would have been more profitable if the time is used to make his own crafts for the markets. His products were sold at Pasar Khadijah, Kota Bharu.

Sulaiman gets orders from collectors all over Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei to make sword and *keris*. During the researchers' visit, his partner, who is also his relative was working on a samurai sword. According to Sulaiman, the younger generation would not

want to work in a hot workshop near a furnace. He claims that the younger people were more attracted to work at the shopping mall in Kota Bharu. The diminishing interest among the young people in learning and developing skills of craftsmanship will result in the extinction of expertise and knowledge of *keris* making. It would lead to the demise of this distinctive Malay heritage.

The Dealers' Story

Cikgu Daud and Cikgu Nasir are both traders of Malay Crafts, particularly *keris*. Cikgu Daud lives in a big bungalow just behind the Renaissance Hotel of Kota Bharu, while Cikgu Nasir lives in Tawang, also a bungalow, which also served as his sales office. Looking at their houses, one would conclude that both Cikgu Daud and Cikgu Nasir are quite well-off. Indeed selling Malay crafts is a profitable business. Cikgu Nasir open a blog located at <http://cikgunasir.blogspot.com/>. He uses his blog to promote his business as well as some knowledge sharing on Malay traditional weapons. A *keris* is sold as cheap as RM450.00. He also sells in bulk to dealers in other states. Cikgu Nasir is expert in wooden craftsmanship, especially for the handle and sheath of the *keris*. With his knowledge Cikgu Nasir can evaluate the quality of each *keris* and decide an appropriate price.

Cikgu Daud, on the other hand, would not sell a *keris* to anyone. According to him, not everyone can buy a *keris*, and not anyone can own a *keris*. He believes a *keris* has its own spirits. Owner of *keris* can suddenly fell into misfortune if the *keris* is not suitable for him. During the interview he related several examples. At times he makes the *keris* himself or get them from the craftsman. The *keris*, which he makes has no duplicate. Thus he sells his *keris* at very expensive price starting at around RM5,000.

3.2 The Issues

Generally, all respondents agreed the indigenous knowledge among Malay communities in both states were found to be at a crossroad. It is no longer able to attract young people to be involved, either as a producer or a seller. Financial and human capitals are two main problems face by all the respondents. Incidentally, material resource is not a problem, because *keris* and other metal craft products are made from recycled iron, such as discarded car-springs, rods, etc. A *keris* could be moulded from different types of iron. The craftsmen agree that the older the iron the better is the *keris*. Despite abundant material, the indigenous knowledge among the Malays in Kelantan and Terengganu in these two areas are under threat of extinction. Lack of interest and attractions as well as absence of the pull factor for the young people to be involved in this industry is indeed very worrying.

Financial assistance, especially to provide capital such as for building workshops and setting equipments are in dire needs. Although there is such assistance from the authorities but the craftsmen claim that it is only selective and not comprehensive. Furthermore the aid is a "one off" and the craftsman is left to grapple with their financial problems on their own. It is also very clear to the researchers that there is insufficient support from financial institutions in terms of providing such loans, if they plan to expand their activities. This lack of support is de-motivating to the younger generation to be involved in metal crafts making.

The authorities responsible for the above situation are the Perbadanan Kraftangan Malaysia, whether at the Headquarters or and state level, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry through the *Satu Daerah Satu Industri* programme (SDSI), the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture. Their action plans and specific strategies to help improve the situation appear to be inadequate. Perbadanan Kraftangan has played the most important role in this context. Capital, equipment, expertise, promotion, marketing, advisory and training services are the core activities of the Perbadanan. Ministry of Tourism has also been quite aggressive in marketing the crafts as unique products of Malaysia to tourists. Surely this is an opportunity that is wide and big for this small entrepreneurship. Although this assistance is acknowledged but clearly there are some weaknesses as it is selective to prioritized industries. For Rusdi of Kg Padang Bual, Jertih, he has to continue his fight of sustaining this Malay heritage alone. Indeed, it is an alarming scenario that the indigenous knowledge of *keris* making provides little or no continuity since there is lack of enthusiasm among the locals to learn. The expert Rusdi himself has no student.

4.0 Suggestions

The Researchers would like to reiterate that this study is to see a general picture about the actual situation on the ground of indigenous knowledge especially among Malays in Kelantan and Terengganu. Some effort has been taken by the authorities to promote developments of the Malay culture. They are, however, still not enough to sustain the decaying industry. *Keris* makers, a small number of very special craftsmen face a daunting task to keep their trade afloat in a market of counterfeit products, plastic toys and video games. The sustenance of indigenous knowledge for the future is at stake, without the participation of the younger generation. Indeed, if this trend continues, it would not only cause the extinction of a culture and the indigenous knowledge of the Malays, but it would leave a very significant gap between the older generation and the younger generation who has increasingly forgotten their heritage. The claws of globalization add more injuries to the ailing industry. Following, therefore, are our suggestions:

1. An effective promotion need to be carried out by the relevant authorities, particularly in an effort to generate interests and desire among the younger generation to venture into this trade. Training institutions such as the National Craft Institute, local universities and others should take proactive steps to increase the intake of students for this area of study or to introduce a new programme if it does not exist yet. Real effort should also begin from primary school level. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture should consider of a serious effort to introduce the craft making subjects at school level. Craftsmen of this trade should be used as icon or role model for the students.
2. The profiles of those with such skills should be updated accordingly. An overall effort is needed immediately to collect and gather such information. This action is useful and vital,

especially in the context of monitoring progress of the craftsman as well as to enable appropriate assistance and expertise for improvement. Relevant agency officials should come down to the ground regularly in order to ensure that the currency of the data and accuracy of the assistance.

3. Financial institutions should be more open in providing financial assistance to potential craftsmen. Prejudices and sceptical towards the crafts as “arts” of little value should be eliminated, if the country wants to preserve this national heritage. This so called “art” in reality is as science as a technology-based “innovative” gadget of the millennium. Rusdi can tell which iron is “older” than the other, which is “purer” than the other and hence which is more suitable to be recycled into a beautiful keris.

4. Aggressive marketing is among the most important starting point in developing any business today. The craftsmen, however, who conduct their business on a small scale, are less aggressive in marketing their products. They only relied on word of mouth as promotion. It is suggested that the authorities could help market their products to the broader market. Craftsmen could be guided to seek the best method of marketing their products in the future. Craftsmen have no time to attend courses’ therefore, government agencies’ officials were the ones who must provide the “hands-on” tutorials on the fields.

5. Research on history and preservation of heritage should be encouraged, not alienated. If a nation’s identity is importance, then a heritage should be preserved. Racial integration is not a hindrance to heritage preservation. It is the right of the citizens to retain their cultural heritage. If this heritage could be adapted as “income generating projects,” for the small entrepreneurs, it should be supported. The output of the researches would be able to provide the information to the future generation, not just as an academic exercise, but as complementary to the way of continuing life.

6. Keris is a part of the heritage of the Golden Chersonese and the islands and land around it, which today are entrenched within the Southeast Asia. This circumstances demands that the action to preserve this indigenous knowledge has to be a collaborative effort of the Southeast Asian member States. Policy makers and experts from the member States must design a collective strategy to revitalize this dying trade.

5.0 Conclusion

We are in a dilemma. For instance, while we are trying very hard to keep our ancestors’ knowledge that is rich in heritage and culture through the transfer from generation to generation, we find, at the same time that the scenario is the other way round. It is certainly not easy to maintain such knowledge since the younger generations in rural area are migrating to urban area to find better jobs for their livelihood. This situation causes the knowledge to retain in the heart of the older generation in villages without any effort to

transfer them. This is a real case when we can hardly find the younger generation who are knowledgeable of the traditional/herbal medicine, traditional boat making, weapon pageantry, craft making, batik printing and “songket” weaving and so forth.

What are the direction and future of indigenous knowledge among the Malays? The question is whether they are able to survive in the environment and a more challenging environment today. The truth in our study is that the question of the future of the cultural intelligence of the Malays is very much dependent on the Malays. If the people do not appreciate the heritage of their own ancestors, it is obvious that it would be doomed and extinct. Of course, if this question was posed to each of the Malays, they will say no. The question is: What are the policy makers and the Malay community doing to prevent this demising of heritage from happening? Indeed, it is hoped that this study could serve as a “wake up call” and open some minds, especially among the policy makers, agencies and people to reflect the extent to which actions could be taken in advancing this field of “arts” to achieve real results. Apparently there is more work to be done and the most urgent. It is imperative that a social marketing strategy is developed in a big way to conduct a systematic campaign to change attitudes the Malays in particular to love the tradition of heritage products.

A traditional element is one of the most important characteristics that make art and culture of the Malays unique and distinctive. The method of making a *keris* through a complex process and traditionally completed by hand will not be available anywhere else. The aspect of making a *keris*, which began a long time ago, without a sketch or a drawing board (unlike producing our modern equipment), is extremely impressive. This aspect makes it difficult for knowledge transfer, but not impossible. One cannot depend on the United Nations to dictate the member states and have its council to decide what is heritage what is not (see: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext>). It is prerogative of a sovereign nation to make its own decision to define its heritage. Heritage is not artefact of “buildings” left by colonials or statues of the colonial “masters”. A nation’s heritage comes from the nation’s ancestors. Without changing the setting of this mindset, any traditional craft-making would be left permanently at a disadvantage. A *keris* is not a built environment. Yet, it competes in terms of the materials used in building such as fine wood, complements the environment through recycled used of iron as well as serve as accessories to the interior decoration of a building. This indigenous knowledge may appear small, but they could make a big difference to the people’s *semangat* (spirits), pride and nationhood. Sustainable livelihood is a tool for economic survival; heritage preservation is the final output. Since it is important to the authority concern in making sure this knowledge is sustain forever. In line with this, the research by Rasha Mahmoud El-Zeney (2011) could be integrated with this study. Rasha among others proposed there should be more organise training programs, i.e. seminar, conference, training, courses and etc. to increase awareness among students and academics on issues of sustainability. At the same time the Government’s also should take a step to develop more real life sustainable projects is also highlighted as an effective move towards enhancing public’s awareness on the importance of sustainability in the built environment, and in this context it can be tailored toward to inculcate awareness program toward traditional heritage such as *keris*. The local media must play a role in generating more

public awareness towards environmental sustainability, especially in a context of indigenous knowledge in Malaysia.

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