Informal heritage-making at the Sarawak Cultural Village, East Malaysia

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ABSTRACT
Scholars have always been fascinated with cultural theme parks as tourism attractions or as vehicles for identity formations. With respect to the latter, the focus has been on how these consumption landscapes also portend spaces of representation that mobilize certain attributes of ethnic groups within territorial boundaries as a means to bind them together and link them to their terrains, although these ideological exercises are often times contested by the very people they seek to depict. Yet, comparably less emphasis has been paid on how local visitors can themselves draw upon their own cultural reserves to rethink the meanings of these spaces to make them more relatable. Drawing on participant ethnography and interviews with key staff and visitors, this paper examines how locals have sought to unmake and remake one such theme park, the Sarawak Cultural Village, to enhance resonance for them and for other visitors, at times even going against intended narratives. In so doing, the paper extends current scholarship beyond seeing themed spaces just as places where the formal employment of heritage for identity-building may be contested; they are also where meanings can be (re)negotiated ‘from below’, proffering more possibilities for co-constructive heritage-making.

KEYWORDS
Cultural theme parks; co-constructive heritage; identity formations; meaning-making ‘from below’; Sarawak Cultural Village; East Malaysia

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Introduction

Since the turn of the twentieth century, theme parks — defined here as enclosed spaces that contain components ‘ingeniously tied together and promoted to the public as a coordinated package of attractions or facilities around a single theme’ (Chubb & Chubb, 1981, p. 379) — have proliferated in Asia. In Malaysia alone, there are today over 20 such parks that have emerged in the last two decades (Hoffstaedter, 2008). Among these are those showcasing the history of places and the ethnic heterogeneity of those living within them, such as the Taman Mini Malaysia (in Malacca, dedicated to displaying the diverse architectures and cultures of different states within the country) and the Mari Mari Cultural Village (in Sabah, depicting the traditional homes of the state’s ethnic communities). Frequently controlled by a single business interest, and almost always governmentally sanctioned if not owned, these parks serve as objects of the ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 2002) — although increasingly also where tourists can actively encounter and engage cultural Others (Hendry, 2010) — as well as, specific to the purposes of this paper, a means to preserve diverse aspects of a place’s heritage as tools for cementing collective identities although the degree that these objectives are realized varies.

Yet, while the literature on cultural theme parks has largely considered the contested nature of these spaces of representation, there has been comparably less emphasis on how local visitors themselves can draw upon their own cultural reserves and initiatives to rethink the formal meanings of these spaces and make them more relatable. Addressing this lacunae, this paper examines how the intended meanings and representations rendered at one such site, the Sarawak Cultural Village — initially established to forge a ‘Sarawakian’ identity amongst the state’s population — have not only been critiqued, but also been unmade and remade by local visitors as a means to enhance the site’s resonance for them and for other visitors. In doing so, the paper seeks to extend the current scholarship on the subject beyond seeing cultural theme parks as mere platforms through which the formal employment of heritage for identity-building may be (potentially) contested; they are also where meanings can be (re)negotiated ‘from below’, thus proffering possibilities for more co-constructive heritage-making to occur.

Methodologically, the paper draws from the author’s engagement with the site during a 3 months’ period in 1998, and sporadically between then and 2014. These fieldwork stints, mostly accomplished while staying in situ (or nearby) and helping out with the day-to-day running of the themed site, have allowed for extensive mappings of the site over time and, based on multiple sessions of onsite observations, ethnographic materials pertaining to what visitors do (and say) as they make their ways around the space. During this time, interviews were also conducted with key staff members (such as the Resident Manager [overall in charge], the Events Manager and the Marketing Manager [in charge of events and marketing respectively]), and also 36 visitors from Sarawak. Conducted in English and Malay, the outputs of the interviews were then transcribed and (where necessary) translated, before they were coded according to themes like the site’s aims, how these are materially manifested, issues related to the running of the site and, for visitors, their on-site experiences.

The politics of identity and heritage co-construction

Cultural theme parks, both those simulating the past and others that depict ethnic diversity within particular locations within the present, are now a global phenomenon. While
their origins may be attributed to the Skansen open air museum in Sweden established in 1891 to protect rural Swedish folklore/culture threatened due to industrialization (Hoffstaedter, 2008), those that can be found today often tend to serve dual functions. On the one hand, they are where visitors are not only exposed to, but increasingly also able to interact with, cultural environments and people that/who are temporally, geographically or ethnically ‘Othered’ from their own, such as those no longer around or found in less accessible locations (Ross, 2004). These re-created leisure landscapes are often fodder for ethnic tourism, where visitors can sample what locations can offer by way of culture and history (Ryan & Aicken, 2005). Put together to satisfy demands for consuming cultures, these spaces represent ‘simplified and standardized versions of ethnic culture to satisfy metropolitan tourists’ yearning for [and desire to actively encounter] the entertaining, unusual and exotic’ (Yang, 2011b, p. 332).

Yet, they also present ways to connect local communities to their forebears, which serves not only to link them to their ‘roots’ but also accentuate their sense of identity and attachment to the place they call ‘home’ (Hitchcock, Stanley, & Siu, 2005; Oakes, 1998; Stanley, 2002). Indeed, as the Skansen case exemplifies, such theme parks cauterize the motion of time and preserve traditions at risk of being lost due to modernization (Gordon, 2009). Trimm (2012) also refers to them as liminal spaces that satisfy their nostalgic longing for the past and escape stresses of contemporary society. They also allow for urban dwellers to familiarize with the cultures of others in the nation with whom they might never meet in reality, thus strengthening imagined communities (Yang, 2011a). As ‘reenactment[s] of life worlds’ (Barndt, 2007, p. 386), such sites too allow the young to be exposed to landscapes no longer around, widening their scope for history-learning. There are also benefits for marginalized peoples in ‘provid[ing] a vehicle for economic development and cultural sustainability when they are provided with opportunities of work while preserving their cultures’ (Yang, 2011b, p. 316).

Thus, the contemporary cultural (or historical) theme parks are shaped by societal concerns and may be seen to target both insiders (those whose cultures are being portrayed at the site) as well as outsiders (such as tourists and the younger generations without much intimate connections to the represented pasts or cultures) (Oakes, 1998). It is also for this reason, as well as due to the competition offered by the proliferation of this type of leisure attractions, that such sites frequently adopt creative ways to entice visitors to come, making them veritable landscapes of ‘edutainment’ that combine the entertaining joy of allowing spectators to encounter difference (as theme parks tend to do, see Kane, 2013) and the more serious work of educating the masses (Hendry, 2010). Influenced, as they often are, by the present, these theme parks also become highly ideological spaces and are selective. For one, as Martin (2010, p. 537) puts it, their mobilization as a means of bringing people together ‘often re-inscribe a totalizing perspective that constructs Others as unified cultures’ even when they are not (emphasis in original). Indeed, they portray the ways of life of local inhabitants often based on specific visions/versions of what a community should look like, such that aspects seen to work against this are obscured if not erased (Witz, Rassool, & Minkley, 2005; Oakes, 1998; Teo & Yeoh, 1997). Yea (2002, p. 174) also cited how such spaces render overly ‘simplistic images of primitive, exotic communities cut off from the modern world from which the tourists themselves come… [usually with] very little in common with the realities of life in the destination communities’. Thus, communities are represented as ‘less developed’ and not dynamic, which may leave
visitors with the impression these represented cultures are backwards even as the truth is often far from it (see also Bruner, 2005; Martin, 2010).

However, not everyone necessarily interprets the salience of a particular cultural theme park the way they have been intended, and thus these can also be subverted. Some ethnic groups, for instance, use theme parks as a means of ‘enhancing awareness of ethnic groups that are being undermined by internal and external forces, protecting the cultural heritage of marginalized minorities, and promoting the restoration, preservation and recreation of ethnic attributes… seen as dying out or passé’ (Yang & Wall, 2009, p. 560). Friedman (1994, p. 110) also cited how the Ainu, an ethnic minority in Japan, had established their own villages as a means of reproducing their cultures even as they often fall under the then prevailing Japanese state’s attempts to assimilate them into the national culture, thus making these themed villages ‘a strong political instrument in the constitution of that [Ainu] selfhood’. In these regards, not only are cultural theme parks ideological, they can be highly contentious, where spatialized representations of culture may seek to divide, rather than unite, populations.

To emphasize such sites as merely contested spaces, however, is to overlook how they may also be (re)appropriated by consumers in their own ways to allow for self-identification. In this respect, the paper draws inspiration from Winter’s (2004) examination of Angkor (in Cambodia) as a site of everyday heritage-making vis-à-vis formal heritage-making. Adopting the idea that an individual’s engagements with the world are embedded not only with (the formalized heritage of places but also with informal practices and social relationships within (heritage) places, Winter (2004, p. 331) calls for consideration of how ‘places and times are actively constituted and reconstituted in multiple ways on an ongoing basis’ by the people themselves, where individuals deliberately shape places through their own discourses and activities which may not necessarily align with the purposes for which those places were erected (emphasis added). Indeed, as Winter (2004, p. 343) indicates in the case of Angkor, ‘temporalities of history do not exist as abstract, external realities… Rather, they are articulated through the personal, embodied experiences of visiting Angkor today’.

This pushes us, therefore, to examine not only how cultures (and histories) are formally forged at these increasingly ubiquitous leisure spaces, and in turn criticized by visitors in terms of how this has been accomplished, but scrutinize the ways in which the task of making (heritage) meanings may occur on the level of the visitors themselves. For sure, heritage can also be interpreted less as what is intended but (re)appropriated ‘from below’ by visitors seeking to enhance the site’s resonance. Here the visitors may employ their own personal associations and practices to overcome limits of formal representations, hence facilitating identity ‘co-constructions’ to better relate to heritage places (Chronis, 2005). It is to revealing some of these exemplars of heritage-making ‘from below’ that this paper seeks to do through the case of the Sarawak Cultural Village, focusing on local visitors although the argument may also extend to foreigners. It then also suggests how such narratives and practices may be mobilized as means to mitigate logistical issues faced and enhance the experiences of other visitors. Prior to that, however, it is important to first provide a background to the site itself.

**Producing the Sarawak Cultural Village**

Located at the Damai Peninsula, the Sarawak Cultural Village (hereafter referred to as the Village) is a cultural theme park conceived ‘out of the state government’s desire to display
live“ the state’s rich cultural diversity in one single place for the benefit of the visitors and the tourists’ (Sarawak Cultural Village, n.d.). Set against the backdrop of the Santubong mountains, the Village represents the diverse cultures of Sarawak’s ethnic groups within a bounded area of 17.5 acre. Costing MR (Malaysian Ringgit) 9 million, the task of realizing the brainchild of the then Chief Minister of Sarawak, who felt that Sarawak needed such a one-stop attraction for visitors to explore the state’s richness, fell onto the hands of the Sarawak Economic Development Council (SEDC), a statutory board responsible for most of the state’s tourism developments. Opened in 1991, the Village has, since then, become one of the premier cultural attractions of Malaysia. As put by Reed and Tarman (1998, p. 2), the Village ‘has become one of Malaysia’s best known… visitor attractions, and an important showcase for Sarawak’s cultures and traditions… over 70 000 visitors a year pass through its imposing wooden gates to enjoy the “Sarawak Experience”‘. Indeed, this is still the case today given the awards it has garnered to date (see www.scv.com.my), and the visitors it still attracts (e.g. 119,000 visitors in 2010, setting yet another record) (Borneo Post Online, 2011).

The main attraction at the Village comprises the traditional houses belonging to seven ethnic groups in Sarawak: Iban (‘Sea Dayaks’), Bidayuhs (‘Land Dayaks’), Orang Ulu (the upriver people), Penan (itself one of the Orang Ulus although singled out perhaps because of their nomadic nature), Melanau, Malay and Chinese. The exhibited houses are arranged in a circle completed by the gift shop (selling trinkets, key-chains and other ‘ethnic’ souvenirs of Sarawak), cafeteria and cultural auditorium (where the cultural show happens). So, for a visitor, it ‘reflects a journey through the state, with the lake at its center representing rivers that are the lifelines for so many of Sarawak’s communities’ (Reed & Tarman, 1998, p. 4). Yet, according to Latrell (2006, p. 129), the siting of the Village may also be ideological:

[The arrangement of the houses around the lake is also] to maintain a balance between cultural diversity and a kind of general equality. The lake on whose edges the houses have been built, being round in shape, ensure that no single group is unfairly favored over any other.

In this regard, the general outline of the Village is itself a reflection of how the Sarawak state (through the SEDC) has been evenhanded in its treatment of its ethnic groups — and aligns with the Malaysian tourism tagline of ‘potpourri of culture’, where multi-ethnic Malaysians co-exist harmoniously with one another — although, as will be clear, the selection of which groups to represent in situ has also been popularly critiqued as too much of an abstraction.

Whilst the houses are set harmoniously with the surrounding nature, their interiors serve as spaces for expositions and performances. Each holds representations of the everyday ways of life of the different represented ethnic groups, including exhibits on traditional food, dance, music, costumes, sports and many others. As a self-proclaimed ‘living museum’ (see www.scv.com.my, accessed 5 January 2016), the Village dispenses with the model of artefacts behind glass panels or security barriers in favour of ordinary items (such as beds, furniture, cooking stoves, altars and many others) arranged as they would be in a person’s home, ‘each one a little sliver of a departed world and as such to be displayed as an auratic item’ (Trimm, 2012, p. 536). To emphasize the ‘living’ component, each house has dancers and musicians who put up a welcome performance, a storyteller who greets visitors and tells them about the traditional culture associated with the house,
and demonstrators that showcase aspects of the cultures depending on their expertise, such as making beads, weaving and carving, some sold as products. The presence of the dancers, storytellers and demonstrators, each dressed in the customary costumes of the ethnic group portrayed, indicates the desire to make the houses look lived in and ensure visitors leave with knowledge of the local cultures. Their roles, especially that of the storyteller, are crucial, given that there are few storyboards in the houses and around the Village, meant to preserve the impression of entering an actual village rather than a simulated one built from scratch in an area never populated before.

Also unlike the traditional museum, where visitors tend to be passive spectators of exhibits on display, in the Village, visitors here are allowed to engage with the objects in the houses and partake in the activities found in them. In the Malay house, for example, visitors are invited to dance to the tunes of the musicians playing traditional music and play traditional games (such as the spinning top or gasing), as well as treated to the smells (and, for a small price, tastes) of customary kuehs (or cakes) in the kitchen by demonstrators (Figure 1). At the end of each visit through the Village, there is also a show (at the auditorium) where visitors witness signature dances of the ethnic groups, after which visitors are pulled to dance with the performers.

Another role of the performers, storytellers and demonstrators is in ‘activating’ objects in the cultural theme park as props in a drama of everyday life; ‘moved from the static, immobilized object of such a regime to one where it takes on an instrumental (albeit mostly in potential) role’ (Trimm, 2012, p. 536). In so doing, the Village serves to
‘encourage viewers to imagine objects back into the hands of their former owners, to understand objects as if in use (that is, still in relationship to a body) instead of as collected objects of display’ (Macdonald, 2007, p. 179). This is compounded by the fact that the visitor experience in the Village is made visceral, tactile and sensorial alongside it being located in a more ‘naturalistic’ setting — the rainforest in the Village’s case — that fuses elements of conventional museums which are aiming to collect, preserve and display artefacts, and open spaces which are constructed so as to create a sense of place’ (Nousia, 2013, p. 179). It also coincides with the recent trend of museums which are increasingly adopting modus operandi that, in line with demands of cultural tourist these days to ‘get involved’ rather than to just ‘gawk at’ exhibits (Ross, 2004), allow for more interactive forms of display commonly associated with amusement parks and open air museums (see Hochbruck & Schlehe, 2010; Kane, 2013; Lukas, 2008).

In many ways, the Village may be seen as a solution to problems associated with cultural tourism in Sarawak. First, it minimizes issues related to visiting actual villages, many located in inaccessible locations. Those villages easier to access tend to be overrun by tourists, thus disrupting the day-to-day realities of the inhabitants in adverse ways (Sanggin, 2009). By visiting the Village, visitors thus can be exposed to the cultures of not only one but seven groups in half a day! Being a short drive from Kuching, the Village thus overcomes barriers tourists sometimes face when in Sarawak. As the Resident Manager (in 1998) said once:

[The Village] is just like one shopping complex… You do not have to travel just to meet the Orang Ulu, or Ibans, or Bidayuhs… Here you can meet them all in one go.

Also, it lifts some of the tourism pressures on actual villages, some of which are not even perceived as authentic anymore. As the Marketing Manager also mentioned (back in 1998) although it still very much reflects the actual situation during more recent visits:

Here, you still have locals in traditional costumes, in traditional settings, doing traditional things. You go to the actual longhouse, many of them are modern.

Second, the Village is also one of the last repositories of specific cultural attributes of Sarawakian ethnic groups. For example, the Melanau Tallhouse is one of only two left in the whole state (Figure 2). The baruk (communal structure) of the Bidayuhs is also disappearing in reality. In these regards, the Village, much like the Skansen village in Sweden, represents a repository of architectural elements (as much as cultures) that no longer exists in contemporary society, thus preserving these valuable relics of the past not only for the benefit of tourists but also current, and especially younger generations of, locals.

The mission of the Village is to allow the population to not only learn about the pasts and cultures of their forebears but also those from other ethnicities, and envision these diverse groups co-existing harmoniously. As the Resident Manager (in 1998) said:

We have more than 20 ethnic groups here in Sarawak. It is impossible for all locals to know every one of them. [At the Village] we can educate the younger generation … how it is this plurality that makes Sarawak… what it is today.

According to Lattrell (2006, p. 128), cultural theme parks are vehicles for identity building where, ‘Tied as they are to government agencies, they become places where nations can experiment with new identities’. Here, in addition to competing for a piece of the
tourism pie in Sarawak, the Village may also be seen to fit within the context of ‘1Malaysia’, the grander nation building project introduced by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak in 2010 which seeks, via the idea of ‘Unity in Diversity’, to ‘graft an ethnically homogeneous nation-state on an ethnically-divided society’. This is premised on the idea of national unity regardless of ethnic and religious differences (Bunnell, 2002, p. 109), an asset also used to promote Malaysia with the brand of ‘Malaysia, Truly Asia’ (www.1malaysia.com.my/, accessed 12 June 2015).

While committed to being part of the scripting of Malaysian nation-building more generally, however, the Village remains a space that privileges locals, with purchase put to privileging local visitors over others, even those from West Malaysia. For one thing, a cheaper entrance fee is imposed on its local residents. At the initial stages, local elders of the different ethnic groups to be represented were consulted so as to gain their stamp of approval on how the Village was to be designed and their cultures represented. Where necessary, changes were made to give the impression that the Village would be as much a ‘Sarawakian’ effort as it was to be geared to tourism imperatives. As the Events manager (in 1998) said:

>We wanted this Village to be representative of the people here. We got the elders to ‘bless’ the different houses [such as through prayers and ceremonial rites] and took in their suggestions. When the Iban longhouse was felt to be too traditional and no longer representative, we added in a more modern section.
Indeed, upon entering the Iban longhouse today, visitors will notice how the house is divided into two: one half more traditional and the other more representative of the community living today. As much as possible, artefacts in the houses were donated by the communities themselves. All these efforts were geared to ensuring that the local communities felt they too had a stake in the Village. This is important as a way to ensure that the Village becomes not only a tourism attraction but also a repository of the unique and ordinary aspects of the pasts and lives of the locals that are, for Sarawakian visitors, highly familiar and personalized.

In addition, the management of the Village also ensures that it organizes its own festivals. For example, there is the annual Gawai Tourist Night (or the World Harvest Festival), when a performance is scripted by a different ethnic group each year, whose performance becomes the centrepiece of the outdoor extravaganza that is performed on the banks of the manmade lake. As an attempt to reach out to even more Sarawakians, the performers of the Village also hold performances outside the Village for corporate engagements or as part of state-wide celebrations. The Village also organizes classes to allow the young to be trained in cultural arts and performances, and encourages local weddings and other events. Since 2012, it has also set up the Persada Seni (arts showcase centre). Complete with ‘a dance studio, library, handicraft workshop and a Rainforest Music House that exhibits all traditional and musical instruments of cultures here’, alongside ‘courses such as weaving, beads making, wood, bamboo carving and others’, the Village is serious to promote itself as a ‘cultural arts learning centre’ from which future generations of locals can benefit (Sarawak Cultural Village, 2011).

Appreciating the Village

From the preceding section, it is clear that much effort has been put in to ensure that the Village is a landscape that can appeal to Sarawakians as much as tourists, not only in terms of its adoption of the ‘living museum’ concept allowing visitors to have a more experiential (albeit simulated) encounters with the diverse cultures of Sarawak, but also how local communities have been involved in its production, a reflection of tourism development in the state more generally which emphasizes local participation in tourism activities (see Sanggin, 2009). During conversations with Sarawakian visitors since 2011, it was evident that many were for the most part convinced of the need for such a cultural park. The most appreciated aspect of the Village is its ‘living museum’ concept which makes them feel they are visiting a real village rather than a tourist attraction. As Kalthom (40, Malay) says about the presence of the storytellers and demonstrators that are stationed at each of the houses:

I was happy there is someone there to talk about their cultural heritage. It is like ‘going visiting’ and the ‘owners’ know a lot. We get to learn about Sarawak culture, about what it was like in the past, how our parents do things.

Ramlah (30s, Iban) also highlighted how the Village ensures that tradition may be kept intact even as, as she puts it, ‘our tradition outside is being destroyed because of the lack of interest by the younger generations in “old things”’. She also cited how it is good that, at the Village, ‘the younger generation can have a “hands-on” education about culture and the past’. These comments, among others, show how local visitors appreciate the
interactive and personalized way in which culture is presented to them alongside the fact that the Village allows for even Sarawakians to not only engage in activities in situ but also feel that they are travelling to a far off time that is different from their lives today, a liminal space (Kane, 2013) (Figure 3).

For Tommy (36, Orang Ulu), the Village is good not only as a ‘one stop place for learning everything about Sarawak’, referring to the ability of the Village to educate about ‘not only my own heritage but also the heritage of six other [ethnic] groups, but also because it includes architectural aspects that you cannot see anywhere else in Sarawak today’. The ability to learn about the cultures of other ethnic groups was also stressed by Rose (30s, Chinese) who claims: ‘As Sarawakians, we should know a little bit about the other [ethnic] groups in Sarawak’. Lim (20s, Chinese) also extended this more generally to the fact that:

We should all learn about other cultures so that we can be more tolerant. Our kids should learn about their own cultures and others so they can understand that not everyone is the same. We all have our own cultures and they can appreciate others.

The salience given to fulfilling the desire to learn of the cultures of others may be explained by the fact that Sarawakians today tend to live detached lives. As Aini (40s, Malay) puts it:

In our [rural] village we only live with Malays and there are not many Orang Ulus, or Penans and so on. So our children do not get to interact with people from other cultures. Here my children can learn about other cultures from the people themselves.
Notwithstanding the fact that this shows how the Village may appeal to rural as much as urban dwellers, although for different reasons, for Aini, a visit there has also given her children the opportunity to familiarize with the material and social aspects of other cultural groups that they do not meet regularly. Here, the cultural theme park thus fulfils the intended aspiration for the plural citizens of Malaysia to know of others and become 1Malaysia.

The appreciation for how the Village, through its ‘living museum’ format, allows for visitors to feel as if they are visiting an actual village rather than a tourist attraction is also facilitated by the fact that some staff members actually live where they work. Aznan (35, Kelabit):

I was surprised to find out that the man at the Bidayuh house actually lives in the Bidayuh house. At first I was uncomfortable… I mean how can you let hundreds of people come into your house like that every day? But in the end it was very good.

Indeed, it is the case that the storyteller from the Bidayuh house does live where he works, a relic of how, since opening, the management of the Village has had the policy to allow its staff (sometimes whole families) to reside in the Village so as to make it ‘lived in’, although over the years, many who have stayed are only those who live too far away for an easy commute. Yet, it is important to note that what is accessible to the visitors is still, to use MacCannell’s (1999) terms, the ‘front stage’ (where one works) whilst the ‘back stage (where one stays) remains out of the view of foreign visitors. Still, it does provide the impression, as Aznan continues, ‘that the uncle [sic] has opened the doors to his house for others’.

Another refrain by Sarawakian visitors is the pride felt from representing Sarawak’s cultures to the world. According to Megan (40s, Iban), ‘this place teaches us about how we are a rich culture with so many groups, all fitting together like Lego. The houses fit the surrounding because we are all the people of the land’. Jamilah (40s, Malay) also cited the attraction of the Village as more than just the culture but also the surroundings: ‘the nature, the beach, the camping and also the trekking which show the locals’ close relationship with nature’. This pride is also felt by Adam (20s, Chinese): ‘just thinking about our rich culture, something that is hard to see in the modern world out there, it makes me proud’. From the comments raised thus far, it is clear that the pride they felt emerged out of the richness of the state’s cultural plurality and its staging of this fact to foreigners. They are testament to how the Village, as much as it is a remedy to the problems, and negative impacts of embarking on longhouse tourism, or visits to actual habitats of the local indigenous peoples (Sanggin, 2009; Yea, 2002; Zeppel, 2002), is indeed also seen as a ‘local’ space for Sarawakians, and where the ‘living museum’ concept is perceived to have added value to their experiences of local cultures.

**Critiquing the Village**

While the attempts to shift the Village away from more conventional forms of museums have been highly appreciated, there have also been some criticisms levelled at it. Some local visitors have commented how the Village is still lacking in information about the cultures. As Ramli (30s, Malay) cites, ‘there are no panels to read, and the [storyteller] was too busy’. This could be explained by the fact that, especially during busy periods, it is hard
for the storytellers to ensure that a personalized treatment is given to all.\(^7\) For Kate (20s, Orang Ulu) too, the awe felt from experiencing the materiality of the Village did not make up for the lack of information:

> The architecture is nice and I also danced at the houses. But there was nobody there to tell me about the cultures. Learning about culture is more than just looking at the architecture… it is also about the stories, beliefs, history of the people, their fears.

Serene (30s, Chinese) also remarked that she would have liked to ‘do more things like trying out weaving or playing the *gasing* [the spinning top]’, elements that were not made possible because there were no staff members manning some of the Village’s sections. Hamid (40s, Bidayuh) also asked half-jokingly if the *congkak* (a traditional Malay game) at the Malay house is only meant ‘for ghosts to play with’, commenting on how he would have liked to try but ‘I had no idea how to play it’. Indeed, this is a problem acknowledged by management, particularly with respect to the shortage of staff in the Village.\(^8\) Ironically, back in 1998, there were more signboards where visitors were able to learn about the architectural history of the houses and backgrounds of ethnic groups, although these were removed in the late 2000s to make the Village look less like a ‘theme park’ and more like an authentic, inhabited space.

Another criticism that has been levelled at the Village is that it generalizes some of the ethnic groups. This was mostly aimed at the Orang Ulu house which is supposed to represent a group of 113,000 upriver dwellers made up of ‘more than twenty different tribes and sub-tribes who inhabit the interiors of Sarawak’ (Reed & Tarman, 1998, p. 24). While many of these ‘tribes and sub-tribes’ have been conflated into only one house, the Penans have their own display (as one of the main 7). This is perhaps owing to their nomadic nature which means they are, as a Penan storyteller (himself an Iban) says,\(^9\) ‘unique in how they live in the jungle and not in longhouses, and practice things like *sumpit* [blowpipe] and fish trapping’. Notwithstanding the *sumpit* is also part of Iban culture, according to Zeah (20s, Orang Ulu):

> the culture [as represented at the Village] do not recognise the subtle differences of the Orang Ulu population, the Kemenyah, Kelabits, Kayans, Kenyahs, Lun Bawang… Even the Ibans, the Bidayuhs, there are many different tribes of Ibans and Bidayuhs, of the Melayus, depending on where they come from, with different cultures.

In this regard, the Village has been seen to simplify the complexity of Sarawak culture. Although the decision to conflate the different ‘Orang Ulu’ sub-tribes could be attributed to spatial constraints, or the result of not wanting to amplify the heterogeneity of the Sarawakian population and defeating the ideological purpose of bringing them together as a population, the detrimental effect of this is that there will always be those who see themselves as mis- or under-represented as to subsequently feel alienated. Christine (30s, Orang Ulu) also highlights how representations of the Penans mask ‘the reality that there has been much pressure for them to give up their nomadic lifestyles which makes the privileging of their nomadism here as hypocritical’. This thus speaks to the tendency of such sites to exclude or ignore the irrelevant, the uninteresting and the controversial (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998).

Apart from the construction of a certain invisibility, hiding differences and aspects of everyday life and reality, there is also another issue that has been a bone of contention in the Village. For some Sarawakian visitors, there is the fear that, due to how the ethnic
groups have been depicted, primarily as ‘tribal’ or ‘primitive’ — some of the houses also have exhibits of skulls to portray the headhunting past of many of the indigenous population — foreigners may leave Sarawak thinking people here are ‘backwards’. As Karim (50s, Malay) says: ‘It does not provide a very accurate picture of Sarawak. Much of Sarawak is no longer like that’. The sense here is that perhaps the Village should do more of what they did with the Iban house, which was to divide all the houses into traditional and modern sections to differentiate the fact that, while the people of Sarawak do have a rich heritage to draw from, they have also learnt to move with the times. Karim also cited how ‘it might be better to visit an actual village to see how the people live today… different from what you see here’. This view however runs counter to other perspectives such as that of Thomas (40s, Iban): ‘good thing about this place is that we can compare Sarawak in the past with Sarawak today and see how we have progressed so much over the years, from the skulls in the baruk, a symbol of the culture of our forefathers to Kuching where many tourists visit as well’. Thus, it is clear that while some local visitors saw the value in comparing Sarawak of yesteryears and today, others highlight risks linked to depicting Sarawak as too ‘native’ than the present reality.

One final criticism that emerged during my conversations with the local visitors pertained to the issue of the Chinese house and how the Village seems to marginalize the ethnic group in the representations of their culture. This first emerged in my conversation with Pauline (30s, Chinese) who was surprised that the cultural show did not include a ‘Chinese’ component:

I notice that the Show did not include the Chinese dance. Why is that? Chinese is also part of Sarawak right? This is usually what happens with the Chinese in Malaysia lah [sic]. And why is the Chinese house the last one [around the lake]?

This sentiment of the Chinese being marginalized in the Village was also speculated by Lattrell (2006, p. 140) who cites that, ‘while the Chinese have a replica house of their own, [they] appear to not figure in the theme play rotation’ for the Gawai festivities where each year a story attached to one of Sarawak’s ethnic groups contributes a myth that is then recreated in the form of a play, thus leading him to ask if this was because the Chinese was not seen as ‘indigenous’. Yet, to be clear, even though the houses are located around the man-made lake and visitors can choose the route to take by turning, from the entrance, left (to begin with the Chinese house) or right (the Bidayuh house), tour groups tend to take the latter route so that they can first experience ‘the bridge’ (symbolic of crossing over from the present modern to the past traditional) (Figure 4). Thus, the impression that the Chinese house is ‘the last one’ may be more coincidental than it is an attempt to sideline the ethnic group, although historically it might also reflect the fact that the Chinese were the last group to arrive in Sarawak after the Malays and the indigenous groups. Also, with regards to the absence of a Chinese component in the show, it was said by management this was because there is just no cultural expertise (among the Village staff) for this to be done. Nevertheless, it has still given some local visitors the impression of exclusionary practices within the Village.

(Re)appropriating the Village ‘from-below’

The preceding discussion has shown how locals can be divided in whether they see the Village as truly representative of their cultures, as well as over the efficacy of how the
‘living format’ has been implemented in situ. This is an indication of the fact that, in such cultural theme parks, it is often next to impossible to please everyone, thus making them necessarily contested (Yang, 2011a). Yet, there were also many other instances of local visitors who have engaged in making their own narratives and practices as a means of ‘making sense’ of the Village and creating its relevance to themselves. First, it was common to see locals act less like domestic tourists and more like they are visiting friends. At the Orang Ulu house (in 2013), two families were engaging in idle chitchat. Although the conversation between them was initiated by their shared fatigue after having to climb up the long stairs to get to the house located higher up the mountain, this evolved into discussions over where each of them came from, the cultures represented in the village, and reminiscences of how things in Sarawak used to be. When one was asked her favourite part of the visit, Kalthom (50s, Malay) says:

Enjoying the calmness of the place, the fresh air and ‘the idle chatting’ [bersembang] with the storyteller or with other visitors you normally do not meet. I feel like I am learning about culture not only from here but also from other people that I meet here.

Kalthom even cited how she had a good chat with the storytellers at the Malay house, given that they were all of the same age and shared similar interests. She proceeded to say: ‘At the Malay house, we are all from the same generation and so we had a lot of things in common. We started out as staff and visitors but later we ended up talking about whatever’. The sentiments here really bring home the point that Winter (2004) made where memories and associations of visitors that are produced at heritage landscapes
usually extend beyond just the formal representations of the past and how people perceived these representations; it is also tied to all the different encounters that one may have with not only staff but other visitors where informal knowledge of local heritages, among many other things, may be shared.

There were also those who valued the Village less for what it offered by way of cultural exposure and more how it allowed interactions with the environs. As Ali (40s, Malay) said:

'It is so peaceful here. The nature is so beautiful . . . That’s what Sarawak is like. It is all green. We are not so modern that inside we are not still peaceful and kind people. We may be different culturally but we all share this love for nature.'

This quote highlights one of the positive contributions of the establishment of cultural theme parks that adopt the model of the ‘living museum’ which differ from the conventional museum in terms of allowing for visitors to engage not only with what is represented within the galleries but also outside in the open spaces, in this case the greenery of the rainforest and majesty of the Santubong mountain (Figure 5). Indeed, on any given day, visitors were seen not only ‘partaking culture’ in the houses, or walking from one to the other, but also sitting around the lake, sunning or just appreciating the natural (in addition to the cultural) beauty of the state of Sarawak. What is interesting also is how these visitors relate this to what it means to be ‘Sarawakian’, where it is love for nature, more than culture, that brings the people together.

Figure 5. Orang Ulu house and the Santubong mountain and rainforest. Source: author.
Another observation is that many more visitors have become their own tour guides. Perhaps in the light of the fact that storytellers are not always on hand to deliver their oft-times rehearsed scripts about the houses they are stationed at (especially during busy times), some visitors have taken it upon themselves to explain what they see at each of the houses to their children, thus using the houses and material objects exhibited as cues to narrate what life was like for the people back then. As the following quote I overheard (in 2014) indicates:

See those [farming implements]. That is what your grandparents do to earn a living back in Pontianak. It is hard work and you do not get much in return.

What is interesting here is not only that a mother (aged around 50) was ‘playing tour guide’ to her son (around 10), but also that she is drawing from her own (and her son’s) memories of having visited his grandparents in Pontianak (in Kalimantan) to connect the ‘hard work’ that goes into farming. More than as examples of how material objects — in this case a spade and a hoe hanging on the walls of the Iban house — can act as memory triggers (for the mother) (Miller, 2001), this also shows how visitors sometimes create their own narratives about heritage in such places that are more personal and intimate. Conversations between visitors have also been overheard where locals share how many of the rituals and quotidian practices (such as the traditional medicines of the Melanaus, or the making of Malay delicacies) are still in existence today. These show how the Village has also facilitated connections between the past and the present, thus making the exhibits and ‘performances’ found in situ more relatable. Thus, it would seem that stripping the houses down to their materiality has meant that local visitors sometimes have to be creative in how to interpret the architecture and artefacts found in the Village especially to the younger generations. In addition to the personal narratives that have been triggered for the older visitors, it has also made stories told to the younger visitors more resonant with their own family experiences.

Local visitors have also raised how the Village makes starker the difference between Sarawak and the Peninsular (West Malaysia). According to Megan (40s, Iban) says, ‘Here the people live happily together. Not like in the [Peninsular]… Chinese do their own thing, the Indians do their own things, the Malays also’). Jamilah (40s, Malay) also mentioned: ‘In Sarawak, we have Iban, Kelabit, Kenyah, Punan, Chinese and many more. In [Peninsular Malaysia], we only have 4 [ethnic groups]… we are richer than “those over there”’. These two quotes are interesting. Even though the Village champions the idea of ‘Unity in Diversity’ in terms of how Malaysians should see themselves as one people regardless of their ethnicity and where they come from (in this case, the Peninsular and the East [which comprises Sarawak and Sabah]) (Butler, Khoo-Lattimore, & Mura, 2014), there are local visitors who see Sarawak as different from their brethren in the Peninsular, a microcosm of Malaysian politics more generally. Although Sarawak is wealthy in terms of its natural resources, much is controlled by conglomerates from the mainland such that the state remains economically peripheral, leading ‘Sarawakians to perceive themselves as perpetually marginalized from the more politically powerful Peninsular Malaysia’ (Latrell, 2006, p. 130). As Wyn (40s, Iban), says: ‘we are not seen as Malaysians and we are always economically behind the Peninsular, although 95% of our resources go back to the Peninsular’. Notwithstanding the veracity of the statistics here, it does reflect upon how some locals construct their local identity less on what ties the different components together than on what sets
them apart from other Malaysians. This is yet another example of how visitors can form meanings and narratives that differ from the formal line.

**Conclusions**

The aim of this paper has been to explore and examine the Sarawak Cultural Village in East Malaysia as more than just a tourism attraction. Indeed, while it overcomes tourism problems within the state, they also portend ‘identity laboratories’ (Lattrell, 2006) where local cultural associations are forged. First, it is evident that Sarawakian visitors generally appreciate the existence of the Village, particularly as a ‘liminal space’ where rules of the everyday and familiar are suspended (Kane, 2013) and a bulwark against urban processes and modernization in terms of preserving the cultural past of the people (Hofstaedter, 2008). Yet, there are also concerns, much of them centring on the representativeness of the cultures depicted on site, the generalization of certain ethnic groups, and the marginalization of others.

While the ‘living museum’ concept employed by the Village, which ‘combines the mode of (re)enactment with more traditional museum aesthetics of display, the ephemera of performance with the spatial forms of a given show’s mis-sen-scene, communicative role-play with contemplative objects and texts’ (Barndt, 2007, p. 382), visitors have also raised disappointment at not being able to interact enough with the ‘performers’ and worrying about foreigners leaving with the impression that Sarawak is a ‘backward’ place and its people uncivilized. While the basis for these criticisms may be attributed largely to logistics, they still represent major stumbling blocks to the aim of the Village to make locals feel like they have a stake in the landscape, thus preventing Sarawakians from feeling the Village is theirs.

These findings speak to the literature at large on cultural theme parks as not only politically charged but also contested spaces (see Moscardo & Pearce, 1999; Oakes, 1998; Yang, 2011a; Zeppel, 2002). Yet, to limit the discussion merely to the production or consumption of such landscapes can overlook the possibility that experiences and interactions at these places are often complex, thus giving rise to the more mutually constituted narratives and discourses (Chronis, 2005; Johnson, 1986). At the Village, it was indeed observed how the local people go beyond the appreciation/critiquing of formal representations of culture to engaging in their own practices and formulating their own narratives as a means of enhancing personal resonance. Specifically, this is evident in how locals interact among themselves in terms of reminiscing collectively about the past, appropriating the role of tour guides (or cultural ambassadors) especially to the younger generations, and allowing for personal stories and meanings to emerge that may not align with intended official narratives. Here, rather than heritage being externally arranged artefacts and stories, the artefacts and stories themselves become triggers for what the past was like for the visitor, such that ‘hegemony is readjusted and re-negotiated constantly in the cultural discourse’ (Yang, 2011a, p. 580). Thus while ‘the presence of certain prevailing discourses and framings, in this case cultural tourism, [may] serve to marginalize alternative understandings of heritage and memory’, these too can be reignited ‘from below’ via ‘the personal experiences of being a tourist’ (Winter 2004, p. 343).

This process whereby local tourists (re)appropriate formal representations of culture by attaching their own personal meanings to tangible forms of heritage, ‘playing tour guides’
or coming up with narratives that are not necessarily linked to, or even go against, the purposes for which such sites are established, may fall under what Robertson (2012) refers to as ‘heritage from below’ where the ways that informal agents ‘make sense’ of local heritage is perceived as just as (if not more) important than how local heritage is constructed officially. These instances whereby ‘people acting as story-builders do not simply record the world, but rather create it [thus making them] personalized expression[s] of the storyteller’s own idiosyncratic reading and poetic aptitude’ (Chronis, 2005, p. 388) should, in fact, be further mobilized. First, in enfolding these informal, more personal narratives and practices into the formal operations of cultural theme parks, it would not only instil a greater stake among (local) visitors as part of the cultural landscapes, but also further enliven the ‘living’ component of the ‘living museum’. With regards to the Village, while storytellers do tend to engage actively with visitors at the houses, much more can be done to encourage local visitors to come up with their own narratives and interpretations of the tangible heritage, perhaps even letting them narrate their own stories to multiple audiences. Not only will this overcome logistical limits of the Village, it will also allow for a certain ‘democratization’ in heritage-making where such themed spaces can showcase not only the views of institutions and elites but also the voices and viewpoints of the ordinary masses, thus enhancing visitor stakes and raising their sense of pride (see Halpin, 1997; Ross, 2004). Second, tourists these days are constantly looking to experience the cultures of Others through interactions with, vis-à-vis ‘gazing’ at, Others. By allowing cultural Others employed by the Village to ‘speak’ about their own cultures, it may also enhance other tourists’ experiences at the site. As such, in achieving the dual objectives of cultural theme parks — as tourist attraction and repositories of local pride — a more fluid way of interpreting the past and a more co-constructive approach to operationalizing that past (through shared storytelling) should definitely be adopted.

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Notes

1. It is important to note that ‘Sarawakian’ identity and culture referred throughout the paper is based on the idea of a constructed collective consisting of the unique ethnic groups within the state rather than a single homogeneous entity. Indeed, each of the more than 50 ethnic groups within the state constitutes their own identities and cultures although ‘placed’ under the umbrella concept of ‘Sarawakian’ by virtue of being in the same state territory. Relatedly, ‘Sarawakian’ is also used to refer to local residents in the state following how the locals refer to themselves too as such (translated from ‘orang Sarawak’, or ‘people from Sarawak’).
2. Given the focus on the Sarawak Cultural Village as a ‘local’ space, this paper does not include the interviews conducted with foreign visitors, including those from West Malaysia.
3. While the Village is often portrayed as the cultural repository of the nation (Reed & Tarman, 1998), it still remains very much a leisure and tourist attraction; aside from the gift shop and entrance fee, at the houses, staff too sells these souvenirs among other things.
4. Originally celebrated as Gawai Padi, it marks the final ritual for marking rice harvest seasons and for expressing gratitude to higher forces for an abundant harvest.
5. It is evident from the interviews that many urban dwellers appreciate the Village because it is very different from the frenetic pace of living in the cities today.

6. Many of the so-called 'original families' left for a variety of reasons, mostly for better employment opportunities. Today, only Bidayuh and Chinese houses are inhabited by staff.

7. While there are also musicians and dancers who help out, they leave just before the cultural show to prepare themselves. Demonstrators tend to not engage with the visitors as much.

8. Although actual numbers were unavailable, the general impression given by the Marketing Manager is there is an overall lack of manpower and the high turnover these days means staff tends to be trained only in specific tasks (e.g. as ‘dancers’, ‘story-tellers’, etc.), unlike in the past where staff tend to be able to multi-task, where longer employment durations allowed for them to, over time, ‘pick up’ the skills and ‘perform’ the tasks of others. The loss of ‘original families’, with more of a vested interest in exhibiting their cultures, is also accompanied by the fact that many there now are young and only interested in doing what they are paid to do, hence denoting a lack of pride in their job, with implications on how they engage the visitors.

9. It is not uncommon for staff members to represent and ‘act out’ the cultures of another ethnic group due to the shortage in manpower or when staff members go on leave.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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