

Diversity That Sells: The Success Story of Malaysia's Tourism Branding "Truly Asia"

Firly Afwika

Introduction

On May 13, 1969, Malaysia was swept by the most horrible wave of ethnic riots. At that time, Malaysia was a plural society created by British colonial economic policies. Ever since the riots took place, the *downside* of the on-going negotiations between ethnic interest groups in Malaysia grew more evident. The potentially negative and divisive ethnic fault lines were largely based on the very significant differences in the various ethnic groups religion, language, dress and diet. (Baharuddin 2008, 4)

Thirty-three years after learning a bitter lesson from the riots, Malaysia found a reliable solution to settle ethnic differences: turning the biggest challenges into potential assets. Instead of living in a society dominated by many contradictions, Malaysia opted to transform this diversity into a selling point for tourism. By launching the campaign called "Malaysia, Truly Asia", the country is currently "selling" its multiculturalism and cultural diversity which represent all the major civilizations in Asia. The positioning of the "Malaysia, Truly Asia" brand campaign gives a true reflection not only of Malaysia's ethnic diversity, but also of its natural, cultural and historical make-up.

This research reviews how Malaysia is "selling" its multiculturalism and cultural diversity representing all the major civilizations in Asia as projected by the promotion tagline, "Malaysia, Truly Asia". During the past 10 years, Malaysia has attempted to serve a unique example of how people of diverse ethnic origins and cultures could come together and fuse into a nation. Many elements in Malaysia's indigenous as well as "fusion" cultures have attracted international attention, and in doing so have brought Malaysia global recognition. Having consolidated its national and cultural identities, Malaysia has begun making its contribution to the world tourism industry through its tourism branding "Truly Asia".

By combining literature study and fieldwork, this research wants to take some lessons from Malaysia's unique experience on managing daunting tourism challenges with appropriate policies. The fieldwork conducted in Malaysia for nine months (November 21, 2011-August 15, 2012), was mostly done in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Melaka. The selection of locations was purposively based on the following considerations: a region with a melting pot of major Asian culture (Malay, Chinese and Indian), a region with cultural, historical and religious diversities that could be potential tourism assets, and a region practicing multicultural understanding within a plural society. During my fellowship period, I took my time visiting cultural and historical sites, and places of worships in Kuala Lumpur, Melaka and Penang.

Malaysia's multicultural society enables it to have many celebrations to showcase the uniqueness of the different customs and traditions. As such, this research also covered major cultural and religious festivals like Thaipusam, the Chinese New Year, Wesak Day, Citrawarna and Floria. In addition, a literature study was conducted in Perpustakaan Tun Sri Lanang UKM and in Tourism Malaysia's internal library in Putrajaya, focusing on the National Tourism Policy and the development of Malaysia's tourism industry for the past ten years. Hopefully, this study could contribute to the literature of ethnic studies and the development of the tourism industry.

Malaysia: A Nation in the Making

Malaysia is a nation of tremendous ethnic diversity. The multicultural nature of the population, often described as ABC¹ (*Ais Batu Campur*, typical Malay mixed ice) – goes back a long way, to the earliest habitation of the Peninsula. Since then, there have been continuous waves of immigrants from virtually all directions. Over time, increasing

interethnic contacts and influences have resulted in a polyglot nation of ethnicities, religions, cultures and traditions. (Salleh 2006, 8)



Figure 1

The Malaysian population is made up of over 70 distinct ethnic groups, some with their own internal variations and sub-groups which add to the complex social and cultural mosaic. The earliest inhabitants of the country were the Orang Asli (aborigines)—who are linked to the Hoabinhians of the Middle Stone Age— and the indigenous groups of Sabah and Sarawak, followed by the Malays. Traders from China, India, Sumatera and Java visited the Malay Archipelago from at least the 5th century, bringing with them Buddhist and Hindu influences, while Islam was introduced in the 14th century. Traders in the later centuries established settlements in the Malay Peninsula. Indeed, cosmopolitan communities are believed to have existed in the Peninsula since the earliest recorded times. The Melaka Sultanate (c. 1400-1511) during its heyday represented an early example of the multiculturalism that now prevails.

During the colonial period that began with the Portuguese defeat of Melaka in 1511 and was followed by the periods of Dutch and British colonization, a second wave of foreigners, mainly from South Asia and China, arrived in the Peninsula. So too did Western influences. In 2006, in addition to the main ethnic groups, there are spread throughout the country people from South and East Asia: the Javanese, Acehnese, Mandailing, Banjarese, Filipinos, Thais, Myanmars and Chams among others. There are also the mixed ethnic

groups such as the Eurasians and the Chinese Peranakan (or Baba), and many inter-marriages. The fluid ethnic and cultural environment contributes to the intriguing cosmopolitan character of the nation, as cultural assimilation through inter-marriage and conversion to other faiths continue to blur ethnic boundaries. They also produce new “hybrids”, whose appearance, including the much touted “PanAsian” look, often belies their mixed racial backgrounds (Salleh 2006, 8).

The various ethnic groups have their own social, cultural and religious heritage. Most of the world’s great religions—Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism—are found in the country. The Malay culture, which forms the core of the national culture, has been enriched by Arabic, Indian and other foreign elements, as well as by animistic traditions. At the same time, the cultures of the immigrant communities have undergone changes and have become localized, particularly in traits such as dress, language and food. The indigenous cultures of Sabah and Sarawak, on the other hand, have not undergone drastic transformation under foreign pressure, although modernization, development, and religious influences have had an impact on the practice of some traditions (Salleh 2006, 13).

Malaysians live in harmony and accept the principle of sharing political and economic power: yet, the cultural lives of the people generally remain confined to their respective ethnic groups. While cultural and religious differences tend to perpetuate the heterogeneous nature of the population, shared values and a willingness among the communities to participate in one another’s festival create an identity that is based not on one culture, but on multiculturalism. Indeed, the government encourages multiculturalism as a means of fostering national unity in this plural society (Salleh 2006, 13). Through the years, Malaysia has continuously made constant attempts to achieve social and cultural consolidation. It has done this through several efforts by each ethnic group to come to terms with the other communities and as a result of the acceptance among the various communities of each other’s religions, traditions, and customs.

Here is one example: Puan Josephine, an elderly *Melaka Portugis* woman, uses this representation in her description of social relations in Melaka:

All the races I have seen and mixed [with] are good, from whichever race, Malays, Chinese, Indians; all are good. There are no problems or conflicts. We are all like family... All of the people I mix with, my neighbors who live close by, from what I remember are good. What they speak about we understand and what we speak about they understand... People have their own races and their races have their own ways to pray or types of food, and some do not eat this or that. It is like, you don't eat this and we do not eat this. These are the things we have to ask and talk about. It is like this: you, you have your ways-lah, and we, we have our ways-lah. There are even those who do not mix it when it comes to food. We are all like family, like brothers and sisters. We understand what particular people do not eat. Like Muslims do not eat pork right, so we do not offer them pork; it is just like that lah.

Religious Diversity in Malaysia

During my research period, I tried to experience religious diversity in three different cities in Malaysia. I encountered religious diversity in a very closed neighborhood where places of worship have been built and are customarily used. To make a comparison of this religious diversity, I went to Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling in Penang, Jalan Tukang Emas in Melaka and Brickfields in Kuala Lumpur.² Evidence of religious diversity in each city is practically diverse, but of all the cities that I visited, I found religious diversity in Penang the most memorable.

When the Chinese New Year was being celebrated in Penang,³ I went to Kuan Yin Temple one of the oldest Buddhist temples in the area. This temple is located in Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, near St George's Church and Masjid Kapitan Keling, thereby making Georgetown, Penang a perfect

place to experience religious diversity. I found this temple to be the most humble and crowded in the neighborhood. It simply belongs to the people in the street. I saw noodle hawkers, trishaw riders and workers building cupboards, repairing bicycles, and selling sundry goods mingled with worshipers from the middle class. In the temple shrouded in incense smoke, I easily found monks alongside many devotees who were burning their joss sticks and praying for blessings.



Figure 2

Meanwhile, in the street corners, I saw a few Christian devotees coming out of St George's Church where they had attended Sunday service. As I walked farther, I found the small Indian temple called Sri Mariamman Temple sitting across the Masjid Kapitan Keling building. I purposely chose a strategic place from which to observe how these people from different religions interacted with each other. In the late afternoon, a call to prayer faintly echoed from the mosque, signifying that it was the time for the *Asbar* prayer of the Muslims. People continually walked into the mosque to do the prayer. Almost simultaneously the Indian temple keeper, who looked busy sweeping the street, greeted some Indian devotees who had just finished their rituals and were about to leave the temple. I was stunned by this beautiful sight of people from different cultural and religious backgrounds sharing the same neighborhood where they did their ritual prayers harmoniously, with tolerance and understanding. These people in Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling definitely knew how to embrace their religious diversity and transform it into a positive act of tolerance that remained peacefully diverse.

Similarly, Muslim festivals and observances in several “sacred sites” that are also integral part of the inter-communal festival cycle in Melaka exemplify multicultural interaction. Chinese Buddhist-Taoists and Indian Hindus would join Malay ritualized feasts and prayers at Malay *keramat*, or old Muslims graves of great Islamic teachers, missionaries and holy men, whom they have come to regard and refer to as Dato (a honorific title). Malays regularly go to these sites to sacrifice goats and cows, and would invite Chinese and Indians to participate in the festivities that used to include communal meals, music and dancing. Some Chinese and Indians would also sacrifice goats and chickens at the Malay *keramat* and other groups would join in the prayers and festivities. These take place during the eighth month of the Chinese calendar, the month of the celebrations at the Malay *keramat* Pulau Besar, and in the island lying around five kilometers offshore from the urban area of Melaka. In the past, when Chinese Buddhist-Taoists and Indian Hindus held events at *Keramat*, they used to invite a Malay Muslim whom they paid to officiate at the ancient graves, to perform Islamic prayers of supplication and the recitation of the Holy Quran.

The experience of religious diversity in Malaysia has been equivalently described by Steven C. Rockefeller (year, 97) in his comment on Charles Taylor’s *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”*:

The call for recognition of the equal value of different cultures is the expression of a basic and profound universal need for unconditional acceptance. A feeling of such acceptance, including affirmation of one’s ethnic particularity as well as one’s universally shared potential, is an essential part of a strong sense of identity. As Taylor points out, the formation of a person’s identity is closely connected to positive social recognition—acceptance and respect—from parents, friends, loved ones and also from the larger society. A highly developed sense of identity involves still more. Human beings need not only a sense of belonging in relation to human society. Especially when confronted with death, we also need an enduring sense

of belonging to—of being valued part of—the larger whole which is the universe. The politics of recognition may, therefore, also be an expression of a complex human need for acceptance and belonging, which on the deepest level is a religious need.⁴

Through religious and cultural festivals like Wesak Day, the Chinese New Year, and Thaipusam, this nation wants to build a brand image that will create the perception that Malaysia is a country which allows freedom of beliefs, honor and respect for different religions. These ceremonies are perfect examples of religious diversity turning into tourism products that could be massively consumed by tourists visiting Malaysia.

The Development of Malaysia’s Tourism Industry

The tourism industry in Malaysia has grown by leaps and bounds since the early 1990s. Over the years, the tourist image that Malaysia portrayed had changed from “Beautiful Malaysia” to “Only Malaysia”, followed by “Fascinating Malaysia” and currently “Malaysia, Truly Asia”. This latest image reflects the government’s seriousness in promoting tourism as the second major income earner of the country after manufacturing. To strengthen this venture, the campaign’s promotional materials show a bevy of local beauties representing Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups. In essence, Malaysia is currently “selling” its multiculturalism and cultural diversity representing all the major civilizations in Asia as its tourism image, as projected by the promotion tagline, “Malaysia, Truly Asia” (Amran 2004, 2).

As stated by Malaysia’s Prime Minister, Najib Razak: “What makes Malaysia unique is the diversity of our peoples. This unity in diversity has always been our strength and remains our best hope for the future”. This statement supports by the Second National Tourism Policy (2003-2010), which designates Malaysia’s unique multiculturalism as its major selling point. Turning this diversity into a selling point, the Malaysian government decided to promote Malaysia as a melting pot of three major Asian cultures (Malay,

Chinese and Indian), thereby conveying the idea of unity in diversity. With this tremendous ethnic-diversity, Malaysia has moved towards a pluralist culture based on a dynamic and interesting fusion of Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous cultures and customs. This joint Malaysian culture can be seen in the symbiosis of the cultures of the people within it that reflected a vibrant color of Asia. As a destination of never-ending festivities and merriment, “Malaysia, Truly Asia” captures and defines the essence of the country’s unique diversity.

Cultural tourism⁵ has emerged as a potential form of alternative tourism among both international tourists and domestic travelers. Cultural tourism in Malaysia has had wide publicity, as attested to by the increase in the number of incoming tourists annually. Malaysia has marvelous cultural tourism resources that include multi-cultural, historical buildings, colorful lifestyles and a friendly atmosphere (Mohamed 2004, 1).

As a major campaign created by Malaysia’s government, “Truly Asia” has transformed the country into a popular tourist destination. Both the natural beauty and cultural vivacity of this Southeast Asian nation may now be enjoyed by visitors from around the world. Tourism development in Malaysia has been proceeding at a tremendous pace.

Year	Arrivals	Receipts (RM)
2011	24.7 Million	58.3 Billion
2010	24.6 Million	56.5 Billion
2009	23.6 Million	53.4 Billion
2008	22.0 Million	49.6 Billion
2007	20.9 Million	46.1 Billion
2006	17.4 Million	36.3 Billion
2005	16.4 Million	32.0 Billion
2004	15.7 Million	29.7 Billion
2003	10.5 Million	21.3 Billion
2002	13.2 Million	25.8 Billion
2001	12.7 Million	24.2 Billion
2000	10.2 Million	17.3 Billion
1999	7.9 Million	12.3 Billion
1998	5.5 Million	8.6 Billion

Table 1: Tourist Arrival and Receipts to Malaysia⁶

In the last ten years, tourist arrivals in Malaysia registered a significant rise. In 2011, the country attracted 24.7 million foreign tourists, generating around RM58.3 billion for the country. The major tourist markets of Malaysia have been its ASEAN neighbors, like Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, Cambodia and Brunei. Its other main foreign markets include China, Japan, Sweden, Australia, Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia.⁷

Malaysia started to realize the value and importance of culture and heritage tourism when more and more tourists began coming to check out its cultural heritage. In Malaysia, heritage and culture have also been identified as new niche products to be developed extensively in line with tourism development. Cultural vibrancy is clearly manifested in the ongoing and successful “Malaysia: Truly Asia” promotional drive. In this promotion, Malaysia boasts of hosting a wide variety of Asian ethnic groups that have made it a “little Asia”. Malaysia also has a distinctive multicultural architectural

MALAYSIA TOURIST ARRIVALS BY COUNTRY OF NATIONALITY MAY 2012							
NO	COUNTRY OF NATIONALITY	MAY			JANUARY - MAY		
		2011	2012	Growth %	2011	2012	Growth %
1	SINGAPORE	1,025,126	995,478	(2.5)	4,573,460	4,671,389	(6.1)
2	INDONESIA	155,862	190,898	22.5	745,181	889,113	19.3
3	CHINA	92,916	125,489	35.1	481,518	645,894	34.1
4	THAILAND	120,230	105,412	(12.3)	599,219	545,520	(9.0)
5	BRUNEI	93,219	91,735	(1.6)	497,102	477,524	(3.9)
6	INDIA	83,343	85,008	2.0	277,791	299,478	7.8
7	PHILIPPINES	33,418	47,686	42.7	137,472	194,752	41.7
8	AUSTRALIA	39,664	35,441	(10.6)	231,879	197,572	(14.8)
9	JAPAN	25,592	34,044	33.0	136,722	178,568	30.6
10	UNITED KINGDOM	26,076	28,281	8.5	158,380	166,504	5.1
11	SOUTH KOREA	19,599	19,899	1.5	98,038	114,992	17.3
12	U.S.A	16,701	19,470	16.6	82,293	96,169	16.9
13	TAIWAN	19,204	18,500	(3.7)	82,767	91,319	10.3
14	VIETNAM	13,058	16,881	29.3	59,036	79,792	35.2
15	FRANCE	8,992	9,798	9.0	49,294	59,040	19.8
16	GERMANY	8,230	8,787	6.8	52,840	55,960	5.9
17	NEPAL	4,948	8,584	73.5	29,166	36,819	26.2
18	IRAN	7,244	8,185	13.0	54,191	57,709	6.5
19	MYANMAR	6,083	7,465	22.7	32,286	34,505	6.9
20	BANGLADESH	4,853	6,913	42.4	26,864	31,673	17.9
21	CANADA	6,906	6,608	(4.3)	36,586	37,062	1.3
22	PAKISTAN	5,633	6,430	14.1	25,909	33,129	27.9
23	SAUDI ARABIA	4,366	6,204	42.1	21,201	31,957	50.7
24	NETHERLANDS	6,040	6,073	0.5	32,106	33,640	4.8
25	NEW ZEALAND	7,344	5,408	(26.4)	28,309	26,378	(6.8)
26	CAMBODIA	3,793	4,496	18.5	20,262	18,775	(7.3)
27	SRI LANKA	4,758	4,307	(9.5)	20,714	24,468	18.1
28	LAOS	1,923	3,264	69.7	11,299	13,547	19.9
29	ITALY	2,351	2,506	6.6	15,840	16,231	2.5
30	RUSSIA	2,054	2,502	21.8	17,057	21,460	25.8
31	OMAN	1,585	2,060	30.0	6,201	8,835	42.5
32	SWITZERLAND	1,760	1,873	6.4	10,441	11,242	7.7
33	SWEDEN	2,790	1,668	(40.2)	25,546	19,240	(24.7)
34	SOUTH AFRICA	2,052	1,472	(28.3)	11,411	9,962	(12.7)
35	IRELAND	1,400	1,409	0.6	9,176	7,692	(16.2)
36	DENMARK	1,731	1,361	(21.4)	9,712	11,111	14.4
37	NORWAY	1,273	1,088	(14.5)	8,960	9,072	1.3
38	KAZAKHSTAN	848	916	8.0	7,009	8,776	25.2
39	AUSTRIA	812	872	7.4	5,280	5,715	8.2
40	FINLAND	1,146	820	(28.4)	10,398	11,043	6.2
41	BRAZIL	734	721	(1.8)	3,648	3,668	0.5
42	UZBEKISTAN	463	668	44.3	3,479	4,820	38.5
43	TURKEY	663	657	(0.9)	3,589	3,897	8.6
44	UAE	1,393	624	(55.2)	6,429	5,576	(13.3)
45	OTHERS	23,919	23,964	0.2	167,766	137,004	(18.3)
GRAND TOTAL		1,892,095	1,951,925	3.2	9,323,827	9,438,592	1.2

Source : Tourism Malaysia with the cooperation of Immigration Department

Table 2: Malaysia Tourist Arrival by Country of Nationality, May 2012

heritage characterized by strong Islamic, Chinese and Western influences; these are portrayed in its heritage buildings. The major heritage elements—historic buildings, historical sites, and unique local cultures—are commonly found in many cities throughout Malaysia (Mohamed, 2004: 2).

In Southeast Asia, Malaysia needs to compete closely with Singapore and Thailand on fairly similar grounds, although on different levels. With Thailand, the competition is on cultural and environmental aspects whereas with Singapore, the competition lies on the two countries' urban lifestyle and business features. That Malaysia is geographically located between two leading tourist destinations like Singapore and Thailand explains why it has often been overlooked as a tourist destination of choice.⁸

The branding of Malaysia as “Truly Asia” has finally set the country apart from other competitive tourist destinations because it is a distinct and differentiated signature campaign. It is vital that the “Truly Asia” facet of Malaysia and/or “value for money destination” thrust is captured and embodied in tourist products and services. The ability to do this well has a direct bearing on the quality of products and service has a direct bearing on tourist arrivals.

To this end, Malaysia faces a number of challenges: a fragmented tourist industry, poor communication of the marketing themes to local players in the private sector, and the rise in homogeneous products which cater to mass tourism and have led to the lack of innovation in products development.⁹ To obviate this situation, the industry should adopt a “theme-based” approach¹⁰ in developing and delivering tourist products and services. As stated by Mrs. Shanina,¹¹ “The campaign has set Tourism Malaysia as an example for every other country. As it has already been 10 years since it launch, people have grown familiar with the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” branding; but, for certain markets in the region we have also come up with specific themes for the campaign”.

The “theme-based” approach should conceptualize messages and images associated with “Truly Asia” and/or Malaysia's being a “value for money

destination”. Products and services should be packaged to offer a unique experience for the customer. The theme-based approach has already been applied in the Tourism Malaysia Campaign for the AERO (America, Europe and Oceania) market. As mentioned by Nasrun,¹² “Malaysia, Truly Asia” has been the main brand for the past 10 years, but for the AERO market the agency specifically used the proposition, “Marvelously Malaysia”.¹³ This means that the agency was told to retain the “Truly Asia” thrust, but the entire guideline of the tourism campaign still revolves around Marvelously Malaysia.¹⁴

The “Malaysia, Truly Asia” branding campaign is a positioning that is a true reflection not only of Malaysia's ethnic diversity, but also of its natural, cultural, and historical make-up. Malaysia is one of the countries with many holidays that cater to the diverse populace. As Malaysia is a destination of never-ending festivities and merriment, the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” campaign captures and defines the essence of the country's unique diversity. The cultural practices of the Malays, Chinese, Indian and other minority groups are also encapsulated in the harmonious creed “Satu Malaysia”, meaning “One Malaysia”.

One Malaysia or 1Malaysia is a government initiative under Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. It stands for belief in national unity, irrespective of race or religion. According to Najib Razak, “1 Malaysia is a concept to foster unity amongst the multiethnic rakyat of Malaysia. 1Malaysia values and respects the ethnic identities of each community in Malaysia, and proudly regards them as an asset or advantage”.¹⁵

The concept of 1 Malaysia has been abusively used by Najib to win Malaysia's vote in the elections, however PM Najib Razak and other politicians, national and local officials, use Malaysia's numerous public holidays as prime opportunities to propagate their political ideologies. They deliver speeches in local and national venues, especially during the four major public holidays,—Deepavali, Christmas, Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Chinese New Year—and these are often broadcast to the masses via television and print media. In particular, the three national television stations and the national pro-ruling

alliance government press routinely feature portions of speeches and statements made by national officials. These nationally-distributed Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil language daily newspapers provide *Barisan Nasional* political leaders and the Malay sultans a national medium for consistently broadcasting their messages to the national audience.

Just like other politicians, Najib is chasing votes along ethnic lines by overplaying the “race-card”. However, people are not simply voting on that basis. Almost two years later, after the launch of the concept, the public based on an opinion poll in July 2010, appeared wary of the concept. In particular, the non-Malays surveyed, according to the July 9, 2010 issue of *The Malaysian Insider*, “were almost split on the Najib administration’s national unity agenda with 46 per cent of the respondents believing that the 1Malaysia concept is only a political agenda to win the non-Malay votes”. It also reported that “only 39 per cent of the non-Malays believed that the concept introduced by Najib after he took over the government was a sincere effort to unite all races in Malaysia”.¹⁶

Representing Ethnic Groups, Performing Multiculturalism

Tourism, as an expression and experience of culture, fits into this form of historical contextualization and also assists in generating nuanced forms of culture as well as new cultural forms. As John Urry (1995) suggests, tourism is simply “cultural”, with its structures, practices, and events which are very much extensions of the normative cultural framing from which it emerges. Cultural tourism is tourism, and clearly it is far more than the production and consumption of “high” art and heritage (Smith and Robinson 2006, 1).

In the development of its tourism product, Malaysia continuously uses this cultural diversity as its unique selling point. However, based on the process of its construction, Malaysia currently sells two different types of tourism products. In this paper, I prefer to categorize them into “native tourism product” and “organized tourism product”.

I will now compare “native tourism product”, which are derived from the authentic culture of ethnic groups and “organized tourism product”, which emerge as government’s initiative program to promote cultural tourism in Malaysia through its annual festivals. To this end, I have chosen to compare Thaipusam as the “native tourism product” with *Citravarna* (Colours of Malaysia) as the “organized tourism product”.

Thaipusam as “Native Tourism Product”

Thaipusam, as a “native tourism product” could be categorized as ethnic tourism. With its concern for the quaint customs of an indigenous or a particular ethnic group, the focus on “ethnic tourism” is the cultural practice that defines uniqueness within ethnicity. Thaipusam is a Hindu festival celebrated mainly by the Tamil community to commemorate both the birth of Lord Murugan and the vanquishing of an evil demon. It is celebrated by Hindus during the full moon in the Tamil month of “Thai”, usually in January or February. This festival has been celebrated at Batu Caves since 1892, one year after a temple was constructed and the statue of the deity installed by K. Thamboosamy Pillai, an Indian trader.

In recent years, Thaipusam has gained prominence as a major Hindu festival in major cities in Malaysia, such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Ipoh. This festival has successfully attracted not only hundreds of thousands of Hindu’s devotees, but also local communities like the Chinese and Malay, together with foreigners. Although it is not very popular in its country of origin, the Thaipusam festival has become an annual major tourist attraction in Malaysia. In 2012, some tens of thousand of devotees are walked barefoot from the Sri Maha Mariaman temple in Jalan Petaling, to Batu Caves. During the festival, Batu Caves became a massive bazaar which offered everything from various Indian food, traditional clothes, and accessories, to head-shaving service as a form of sacrifice, while devotees availed of as a form of sacrifice. Although this bazaar was very crowded, it did not detract from the religious essence of Thaipusam.



Figure 3

As far as I could see, many devotees had a *kavadi* (offering) attached to their body with metal hooks or spikes, while others carried a pot of milk on their head. This ceremony continued with a procession that entailed climbing up the 272 steps leading to the Sri Subramaniyar Swami temple, the main grotto at Batu Caves. Once they reached the temple, the devotees offered their *Kavadis* and *Pal Kudam* (milk pots) to Lord Murugan, while the priests were chanting their prayers. Those devotees with metal implements attached to their body had them removed, and their wounds were treated.¹⁷



Figure 4



Figure 5

I personally admired the strong faith and willingness of the devotees who participated at this festival. They carried *Kavadi* which could weigh between 50kg and 80kg, to implore the help of Lord Murugan. As earlier mentioned, they shaved their heads as a symbol of sacrifice and pierced their bodies with metal skewers as a display of faith and mind over matter. During the festival, I spotted

a wide range of tourists from Europe, Australia, Asia, and Africa. Some of them were curious to follow the entire procession of the Thaipusam festival and seemed very enthusiastic about climbing up 272 steps to the top and capturing all of the sacred moments during the festival.

Over the years, Thaipusam has naturally become a tourism product that attracts foreign tourists through the uniqueness of the culture it represents. This festival is a tangible manifestation that every Hindu celebration in Malaysia is clearly supported and shared by all ethnicities.

***Citrawarna* (Colours of Malaysia) as an “Organized Tourism Product”**

Special events such as annual festivals with cultural themes, like *Citrawarna*, have a significant impact on the development of tourism. *Citrawarna* has become a major gathering event that showcases the country’s rich kaleidoscope of arts, culture and traditions nationwide. Ever since *Citrawarna* Malaysia was introduced, it has officially begun with a street parade staged at Dataran Merdeka (Merdeka Square) Kuala Lumpur. *Citrawarna* is an example of a planned tourism product organized by Tourism Malaysia to attract local and foreign tourists alike.



Figure 6

Citrawarna or the Colours of Malaysia is the kick-off ceremony of a month-long celebration of the cultural diversity of the people who live in thirteen states and three federal territories in the country. This annual event successfully combines the best cultural and artistic manifestations of the states and ethnic groups dressed in colorful costumes. It features traditional dances to the melodious strains

of traditional music. Organizers of the event explored all corners of Malaysia, from the north to the south of the peninsula and east to Borneo, to bring together the best examples of exciting traditional and contemporary Malaysian dances to the audience. The parade also showcases Chinese and Indian dance performances, which are usually staged during these ethnic groups' annual celebrations, like the Chinese New Year and Deepavali.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Through the years, Citrawarna has always had a unique theme to attract more visitors. In 2005, the government designated a greater mission for Citrawarna. By opting for “Colours of Asia in Malaysia” as the festival’s theme, the government intended to reinforce Malaysia’s positioning as a miniature of Asia. Therefore, the event not only featured songs and dances from Malaysia, but also the cultural and folk dance performances from invited countries in Asia as well, especially those from Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, China and Korea.

Every year, people purposively come to Dataran Merdeka to watch a massive celebration of the cultural diversity in Malaysia. Among the audiences, I saw locals mingling with foreign tourists from Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and

Africa. Through interviews with these visitors, I found out that most of them enjoyed the multicultural performances the most.¹⁸ Some of them admitted that they were there because Citrawarna was part of their package tour. First timers considered the event as a good way to learn about Malaysian culture and to promote Malaysia to the world. This event was clearly organized by government to expose the colorful culture and traditions of Malaysia to the world and to welcome visitors to Malaysia.

Fostering National Unity in Plural Society through Tourism Industry

At this point, I would like to give an analytical review of how government is transforming cultural diversity into tourism products using two different approaches. This section will clarify the government’s strategy of treating Thaipusam and Citrawarna as potential tourism products using completely different approaches.

By preserving the authenticity of Indian culture, Thaipusam has effortlessly attracted local and foreign tourists through its unique rituals. Thaipusam is an outstanding example of how cultural diversity could naturally turn into a tourism product. This kind of tourism product will endlessly survive as a tourist attraction because through unique festivals like Thaipusam, people will eventually find the comprehensiveness of its culture.

Through the years, Malaysia continuously and constantly striven to achieve social and cultural consolidation. It has done this through various efforts by each ethnic group to come to terms with other communities and to accept their religion, traditions, and customs. By giving ethnic groups the freedom to celebrate their beliefs, the government has provided room for potential multicultural engagement to grow and naturally develop it into a “native tourism product”. This festival is a tangible manifestation that every Hindu celebration in Malaysia is clearly assured of and is shared by all ethnicities.

Through religious and cultural festivals like Thaipusam, Wesak Day, and the Chinese New Year, Malaysia wants to build and aims to perceive the brand

image that this is a country which allows freedom of beliefs, honors and respects various religions. These ceremonies are perfect examples of how cultural and religious diversity can turn into a “native tourism product” that could be appreciated by tourists visiting Malaysia.

In comparison with Thaipusam, a well-organized event like Citrawarna clearly has different mission and implementation process. In this case, a solid collaboration between Tourism Malaysia and the Ministry of Culture to organize well-planned annual events like Citrawarna, not only aims to achieve a commercial target, but also has a national intention as well. Its tasks are to engender local awareness of cultural matters and national identity and heritage, and to enhance national pride and commitment. As Wood says, “the role of the state in marketing “cultural meanings” the choice of which parts of a country’s cultural heritage to develop for tourism constitutes a statement about national identity, which is conveyed to both tourists and locals” (Wood 1984, 365).

Here I could foreseeably assume that Citrawarna, as an “organized tourism product” planned by the government, is a cultural extension of “1 Malaysia” (a slogan promoted by PM Najib Razak) to reinforce his intention of Malaysia as a nation which encourages its citizens to live harmoniously by preserving the mantra “Unity in Diversity”. This condition was equivalently described by Shazlin Amir Hamzah in her journal *Branding Malaysia through Tourism: When Ads Permeate our Consciousness, What Happens to our Identity?*, thus:

The public sector, particularly governments around the world, has taken on the concept of branding as part of nationalistic strategies, especially in the area of tourism. Increasingly, Malaysia is using advertising as a branding tool to achieve various objectives not only in relation to tourism promotion, but in a more ideological sense. Malaysia through advertising over the years, has managed to brand itself as an entity with an attitude and identity

(Hamzah 2010, 1112)

If we only see Citrawarna from the surface, we might easily conclude that it is one of the examples of successful tourism products organized by Tourism Malaysia to generate revenue for the tourism industry. With its street parade concept, it resembles a well-established cultural festival like “Mardi Gras” or “Rio De Janeiro Carnival”. By combining the best cultural and artistic manifestations of ethnic groups in Malaysia dressed in colorful costumes, with contemporary and traditional dances, to the melodious strains of traditional music, this event explores all corners of Malaysia to present the brand “Truly Asia”.

Citrawarna, as the extension of 1Malaysia, clearly has a hidden political agenda: to build among outsiders a positive impression and a strong perception of Malaysian society as one characterized by “unity in diversity”. It also expresses the goal of presenting a united image of “our” national selves to outsiders. Multiracial open houses where members of each race and religion visit members of all others on their respective festive occasions are projected as models of unity, “one way to bring Malaysians together”.¹⁹

In an attempt to achieve its commercial target, Citrawarna might make a tremendous contribution on generating tourist traffic that converts into revenue for the tourism industry. In interview with Mrs. Shanina, she described the contribution of Citrawarna thus: “For the ASEAN market Citrawarna has been well known already. It is one of the longest tourism products that we have. Even if it doesn’t really attract the ASEAN market so much, Citrawarna nonetheless attracts more visitors from European countries”. It is interesting to know that some of the travel agencies in the country have included Citrawarna in their package tours. This proves that the government’s efforts to put its country on the world tourism map and to get global recognition for the brand “Truly Asia” are definitely noteworthy.

However, if we analyze government’s approaches to develop tourism products like Thaipusam and Citrawarna further, we would definitely see a greater purpose. My point of departure will

begin with a note from Professor Shamsul Amri Baharuddin on his journal *Many Ethnicities, Many Cultures, One Nation: The Malaysian Experience*:

Malaysia, since Independence, had been in a state of “stable tension”, which means that we have been living in a society dominated by many contradictions but we have managed to solve most of them through a continuous process of consensus-seeking negotiations, sometimes the process itself became a solution... The downside of the ongoing negotiation between ethnic interest groups in Malaysia is that the potentially negative and divisive ethnic fault lines, based on very significant differences in religion, language, dress and diet, have become highlighted more so than ever before. To the prophets of doom, notably foreign journalists, Malaysia has been perceived as a society facing an imminent danger of breaking down for the slightest of reasons. In general, Malaysians remain more optimistic and believe that they have learnt the bitter lesson that nobody gains from an open ethnic conflict manifesting in violence. But they remain sociologically vigilant and chose consensus, not conflict, as the path for the future.

(Baharuddin 2008, 46)

From his notes, we can conclude that Malaysia will find a new way to develop this diversity into something more beneficial for the country. Within 10 years, “Truly Asia” has become one of the most sought-after tourism brandings in the region. This fact has triggered the government to perpetuate its hidden political agenda for tourism, namely, to blur the ethnic differences in favor of a united image.

Tourism is an external global value, which has not only brought cultural value, but also economic value. When the tourists first came to Malaysia, 3 different ethnic groups (Malays, Indians and Chinese) that previously competed against each other slowly saw the need to collaborate in order to serve the demands of the tourism industry.

There is a pseudo-ideology factor in tourism that could force these ethnics to work together to serve the tourists. Because once this ethnics work together to provide tourism value, it will generate more tourism demand. So we can say that tourism has economic and social merit as it not only contributes to GDP, but also helps dissolve ethnic tensions. In conclusion, their economic demand indirectly controls their ethnic tensions.

My point here too is that government’s effort to promote Malaysia’s tourism industry is not solely for attaining national economic growth. The government has also established a systematic industry that showcases artificial culture by incorporating tourism with creative industry. In terms of reducing ethnic tension, I personally think that tourism potentially creates a convergence of cultural differences. However, the discrimination resolution is a matter of political policy. Tourism is not intended to be an instrumental policy, but tourism could mediate “political ambiance” in order to relieve cultural tensions. As for the government’s hidden agenda, Truly Asia was conceived to nurture the potential of multicultural engagement, while tourism itself is a political psychology tools owned by the government to maintain harmony and peace in the region.

At this point, we have to admit that Malaysia has successfully transformed diversity, which was formerly become its greatest challenge to foster plural society, into its greatest asset by gaining global recognition for its tourism branding “Truly Asia”. Malaysia has succeeded in elevating the possibility of realizing a worldwide moral community with multiple cultural values into a unique selling point for its tourism product. I will put my finishing touch to these remarks by quoting Peter Caws statement: “We live in a world that is irreversibly plural where culture is concerned, but a basis for the harmonious coexistence of cultures can be found in the mutual sharing of what is convergent in the sense specified above and in a mutual respect for what is divergent²⁰—where this does not involve the oppression of individuals or groups” (Caws 1994, 385).

Conclusion

It is beneficial for a country like Malaysia to have marvelous cultural tourism resources that are readily available to be explored: such as the existence of multi-cultural, historical buildings, colorful lifestyles and a friendly atmosphere. In Southeast Asia alone, Malaysia needs to compete with Thailand on cultural and environmental aspects, whereas with Singapore, it has to compete in terms of urban lifestyle and business features. To differentiate itself, Malaysia has tried to create a home for its immigrants to comfortably live and developing their culture to enrich the nation's diversity. By giving a freedom to ethnic groups to celebrate their beliefs, the government has made room for the potential multicultural engagement to grow and has naturally developed it into a "tourism product".

As Wood says, "the role of the state in marketing 'cultural meanings' the choice of which parts of a country's cultural heritage to develop for tourism constitutes a statement about national identity, which is conveyed to both tourists and locals". (Wood 1984, 365). The government's effort to promote Malaysia's tourism industry is not solely for attaining national economic growth. On the government's hidden agenda, Truly Asia was conceptualized to nurture the potential of multicultural engagement, and tourism itself as political psychology tools owned by the government to maintain harmony and peace in the region. This nation wants to build and aim to perceive the brand image that Malaysia is a country that allows freedom of belief, honors and respect religions.

Malaysians live in harmony and accept the principle of sharing political and economic power: yet the cultural lives of the people generally remain confined to their respective ethnic groups. While cultural and religious differences tend to perpetuate the heterogeneous nature of the population, shared values and a willingness among the communities to participate in one another's festivals creates an identity that is based not on one culture, but on multiculturalism. Indeed, the government encourages multiculturalism as a means of fostering national unity in this plural society.

This research concludes that tourism as a cultural extension of the "1 Malaysia" slogan not only used as the biggest asset to develop Malaysia's tourism industry, but also continually used to nurture the multicultural engagement among these ethnic groups. Even though the slogan 1Malaysia itself clearly has a hidden political agenda: to build a strong perception on the part of outsider who consequently acquire a positive impression of Malaysian society, given its "unity in diversity", still we can say that Malaysia has succeeded on elevating the possibility of realizing a worldwide moral community with multiple cultural values into a unique selling point for its tourism product.

Malaysia will remain one of only a few nations in the world today, whose experience and track record in dealing with many ethnicities and many cultures are useful. The Malaysian experience is not to be easily replicated but it can be useful for other states to study closely and, perhaps, gain some useful insights from it. Malaysia has successfully transformed diversity, which was formerly became its greatest challenge in fostering plural society, into its greatest asset in its quest to gain a global recognition for its tourism branding "Truly Asia". This experience shows that it is possible to manage daunting tourism challenges with appropriate policies. I end, therefore on a note of hope that this study could contribute to the literature of ethnic studies and to the development of the tourism industry.

NOTES

¹ *Ais Batu Campur* perfectly described the multicultural condition in Malaysia. Just like Malaysia, *Ais Batu Campur* is a traditional dessert where a lot of ingredients with different color, taste and texture mix together.

² Most of the religious diversity that I've experienced were happening on a religious celebration. I purposively went to Penang to experience the religious diversity on Chinese New Year celebration on January 23, 2012. As for the religious diversity in Brickfields KL, I've experienced it during the celebration of Wesak on May 5, 2012.

³ The Chinese New Year was celebrate on Sunday, January 23, 2012, when most of the temple at the streets are filled with devotees who want to do rituals and prayers, the most unique view was happening in Kuan Yin Temple which located on Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, Penang.

⁴ Steven C. Rockefeller, "Comments", in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, p.97.

⁵ I prefer to use the definition from Stebbins (1996:948). He writes, "Cultural tourism is a genre of special interest tourism based on the search for and participation in new and deep cultural experiences, whether aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or psychological".

⁶ Source: Tourism Malaysia in cooperation with the Immigration Department.

⁷ National Tourism Policy 2004-2010, Ministry of Tourism, page 94.

⁸ *Ibid.* page 30

⁹ *Ibid.* page 55

¹⁰ Theme-based approach generates specific theme campaign in each region to trigger foreign tourists to come to Malaysia. Theme-based approach is an initiate campaign for each region to meets target market's interest and demands

¹¹ Mrs. Shanina is one of the staff in advertising division who handles ASEAN market. I interviewed her in her office Departemen Pelancongan Malaysia in Putrajaya, on June 4, 2012.

¹² Mr Nasrun is the Account Manager for M&C Saatchi, his agency was appointed to handle AERO (America, Europe and Oceania) market for Tourism Malaysia's advertising campaign. I interviewed him in his office in Damansara on May 25, 2012.

¹³ Marvelously Malaysia is a theme-based campaign implemented on AERO (America, Europe and Oceania) market. Based on their research study, tourists from this region are keen to try adventurous trip in Malaysia, that suits with the campaign title "Marvelously Malaysia".

¹⁴ Aside from becoming a theme-based campaign for AERO market, Marvelously Malaysia and Undeniable Malaysia later become the title of the TVC.

¹⁵ <http://www.slideshare.net/simer1319/1-malaysia-concept>

¹⁶ Pool shows divided Malay, The Malaysian Insider, July 9, 2010.

¹⁷ Interview in Batu Caves, Gombak on February 7, 2012. Based on my short interview with several devotees, those who were taking part in the whole procession was expressing their gratitude to Lord Murugan for answering their prayers and fulfilling their vows. Besides, they are also seeking for forgiveness for their failure on the past.

¹⁸ Interview in Dataran Merdeka, during Citrawarna celebration on May 19, 2012 to 50 correspondents. Mostly foreign tourists from varies countries.

¹⁹ Margaret Sarkissian (2000:12) notes that these images of "happy multicultural coexistence" are directed at outsiders, visiting dignitaries, businessmen, and tourists, and at insiders as representations of "established reality". She questioned whether these images are mere "glittering illusions" and observes that cultural troupes are generally organized along "ethnic" lines and very little interaction occurs between groups of different cultural categories that share stages and dressing rooms (ibid: 177).

²⁰ Caws borrowed this formulation from his article "What World Philosophy Might Do for World Culture", in *Philosophy*

and *Cultural Development*, eds Ioanna Kucuardi and Evandro Agazzi (Ankara: Turkey, Editions of the Philosophical Society of Turkey for the International Federation of Philosophic Societies, 1993), p.105.

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