CULTURAL TOURISM AS A WAY FORWARD – A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF TOP-DOWN TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: Malaysia is one of the fastest growing developing nations in Southeast Asia. Over the years, the management of tourism at federal government level underwent several major revamps. The current Ministry of Tourism and Culture has been in force since May 2013, with different departments and agencies managing museums, tourism, cultural heritage, and the arts. Despite the seemingly good economic contribution of tourism to Malaysia's economy, its performance is actually pale in comparison to its two closest neighbors – Singapore and Thailand. This paper seeks to critically evaluate the current top-down tourism management in Malaysia, specifically in terms of its organizational structure and management processes. The extended marketing mix by Booms and Bitner is adopted as the framework for discussions. Three key findings were identified from the twofold qualitative research. First, MOTAC needs to enhance visitors' experience of its Malaysia Tourism Centre through improving the center's facilities, as well as incorporating digital technologies. Next, there is a lack of cultural diversity and motivations within MOTAC. Finally, cultural tourism could be a way forward to elevate Malaysia's tourism to the next level.

Keywords: *Malaysia Tourism, Tourism Management, Tourism Policies, Cultural Tourism, e-Tourism, Cultural Diversity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite having a Malay-Muslim majority, Malaysia is known today as a multi-racial and multi-religious country in Southeast Asia. Its capital city, Kuala Lumpur, is often regarded as an international city for business, finance, and education. Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has shifted from a traditional to a modernized society and from a periphery to a semi-periphery nation. In the 1990s, Malaysia also pushed forward an ambitious economic transformation vision to become a developed nation by 2020, i.e. shifting towards becoming a core nation. As of this research, it is quite unlikely that Malaysia is going to fulfill the vision, as the country is still dependent on wealthier core nations' engagement of its cheaper skilled labor in high-tech sectors, such as film and animation. Tourism also plays a major role in the success of Malaysia's economic development. In 2018, the country saw a total of 25.83 million arrivals, generating a direct contribution of US$19.7 billion of visitors' spending, accounting for 13.2% of total GDP, as well as 11.7% of total employment (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018).

Over the years, the management of tourism at federal government level underwent several major revamps. The current Ministry of Tourism and Culture, or MOTAC, has been in force since May 2013, with different departments and agencies managing museums, tourism, cultural heritage, and the arts. In Malaysia, the formal Destination Management Organization (DMO) is Tourism Malaysia, an agency under MOTAC with mission to promote Malaysia to potential visitors, be it individuals, groups, or corporate, for the greater purpose of economic contribution to the destination's cities. Like most DMOs, Tourism Malaysia is tasked to look into the infrastructure development of the destination for the sake

of tourism, and enhance capabilities of the tourism sector as a whole. It is also the main tourism policymaker of Malaysia, and policies can include incentive/ funding schemes to international stakeholders, who can contribute to the economic development of the destination.

Despite the seemingly good economic contribution of tourism to Malaysia's economy, its performance is actually pale in comparison to its two closest neighbors – Singapore and Thailand. Singapore, a small city state of a mere 700 square kilometers (0.2% of Malaysia's total size), garners about US\$19.9 billion worth of visitors' spending. Thailand, on the other hand, receive a whopping contribution of US\$70.1 billion in visitors' spending, accounting for over 21% of the country's total GDP (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). With such excellent tourism performances in Singapore and Thailand, Malaysia does have some catching up to do in terms of its tourism efforts. This paper seeks to critically evaluate the current top-down tourism management in Malaysia, specifically in terms of its organizational structure and management processes. The extended marketing mix by Booms and Bitner (1981), specifically product, place, people, physical evidence, and process strategies, is adopted as the main framework for discussions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Importance of Tourism to National Development

People travel all the time, domestically and internationally. The introduction of the steam locomotive during the first industrial revolution some 200 years ago had hugely impacted the concept of tourism, shifting from the 'need' to travel for work, to the 'want' to travel for leisure (Cudny, 2016). With the advent of science in the last 100 years, new technologies have further evolved tourism, and made traveling more convenient at lower costs (Tribe, 2011). Technological developments have also sped up the process of globalization, and promoted demand for tourism. As Manuel Castells (2011) has described in *The Rise of Network Society*, it is now a global economy, where business transactions and communication happen over the networks worldwide, breaking the barriers of time and space. Besides work and leisure, people also travel to attend events to share and learn new knowledge, as well as to create new relationships, suggesting that MICE is gaining prominence. Medical tourism is also on the rise, where people travel to specific cities or countries to seek for medical treatment (Jackson, Payne, & Stolley, 2015). No matter what the reason for traveling is, there are substantial impacts of tourisms to destinations.

According to the World Travel Tourism Council's (WTTC) Economic Impact Research (2018), travel and tourism was responsible for the creation of 319 million jobs worldwide, the travel and tourism sector as a whole grew at 3.9%, much faster than the rest of the economy. The number of jobs in this sector is also in a continual state of growth (IATA, 2018). With tourism numbers continuing to increase year on year, there is a fast-growing demand for tourism professionals. As one of the most tourist-friendly destinations in the world, Southeast Asia's tourism industry is one of the fastest-growing sub-regions in the world. With over 104 million international arrivals in 2015, tourist arrivals increased at an average of 8% annually between 2005 and 2016 (UNWTO / GTERC, 2017). The majority of nations in Southeast Asia are relying on their rich natural and cultural resources to appeal to tourists. Tourism will also bring about further infrastructure development to the destination (Timothy & Teye, 2009).

2.2 Role of the Government in Tourism Development and Destination Management

It is not known exactly when tourism policy development began, but sources suggest that traveling began as early as 4000 BC, mainly for the purpose of trade and pilgrimages (Picello, 2017; Misra & Sadual, 2008). There were also accounts by Roman poet Sidonius Apollinaris (AD430-489), which described the development of purposefully paved roads, rest stops, and recreation centres for travellers. Then, roads were kept safe from any potential attacks, suggesting some form of policy development by the Roman Empire to facilitate and reap benefits from the demands of the travelers. The clearest indication of some form of tourism policies lie in the travels of Marco Polo some 700 years ago. Marco Polo, a European who travelled to Asia, documented his travel experience, offering insights on culture, customs, economic and social conditions, as well as hospitality situations of the foreign lands. His writings offered extensive knowledge to future travelers, and triggered many other great travels (Swanson & Edgell, 2013). The modern tourism policy we know of today was only realized in the 20th century, tracing back to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Today, UNWTO is an agency under the United Nations, looking into all aspects of tourism, including tourism policies.

Destination management could be said to be born out of the needs of increasing tourist numbers, although the needs vary in different time periods. Today, it is impossible to disregard the role of the destination's government in tourism policy development (Jenkins & Dredge, 2016). Through its various institutions, such as the tourism and economic development ministries/ bureaus/ agencies, the government makes decisions about how tourism within the destination should be developed, in order to push forward the tourism agenda they wanted. This approach is also known as the institutional approach, or the top-down approach in tourism policy formulation. Governments are also concerned with the economic prospects of tourism, and often, tourism policies are developed in relation to such anticipations. The economic goals of policy are far more straightforward than the social in the sense that the end goal is certain, and will continue to remain true regardless of changing circumstance. The three key goals of macroeconomic policy are stable prices, full employment, and stable growth. A proposal by the International Monetary Fund (1999) has called for the inclusion of equity as a fourth goal in economics. Inui, Wheeler, & Lankford (2006) highlights that economic impacts of travel and tourism industries have been a dominant subject for a government, business and academics. Therefore, early higher education in tourism studies mostly focused on economic impacts of tourism industries. It was not until early 1970s, that political, social, cultural, and environmental implications became prominent as research topics on tourism development. Destination management has evolved from the traditional mode of public governance to a collaborative model where public and private governance of the destination comes together. One advantage of a mixed mode of public and private governance allows for better efficiency, and commercialization of the destination's tourism industry (Morrison, 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a twofold research method to address the research objectives, namely, secondary research and participant observation, both qualitative in nature. Secondary research consists of information published by ministries and governmental departments/ agencies, and will be taken literally as indicative of the state's vision towards tourism development. The set of texts are derived from tourism departments/ agencies' websites, annual reports, legislations, statistics, and any other information which relates to the purpose of the study. Research conducted and produced independent of government bodies are also

considered in secondary research. The texts in this segment comprise of news reports, research reports, and even personal statements published with relevance to Malaysia's tourism. Participant observation is a form of empirical studies, through the process of field work (Wisker, 2008), and allows the researcher to be completely immersed in the chosen visits through participating in a range of activities, and communicating with the different stakeholders informally. Two site visits, once on a weekday and the other on a weekend, were carried out at Malaysia Tourism Centre, or MaTiC, a one-stop centre that offers facilities and services to tourists, and also presents shows and demonstrations relevant to Malaysia's culture.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Revisiting Place, Physical Evidence, and Process Strategies – Visitors' experience in MaTiC

Place strategy focuses on the distribution of the product offerings and its access (Kumar, 2010). MaTiC is an interesting concept developed by MOTAC as a tourism resource centre, as well as an attraction in its own right. It was revitalized from an old colonial building, which was owned by a wealthy and renowned mining and rubber estate tycoon in Kuala Lumpur. Currently, MaTiC holds regular exhibitions of Malaysian themes, and presents daily Malay and indigenous cultural performances in its auditorium. The first impression on arrival at MaTiC, is its emptiness with very few people in the large compound, even on the weekend. Despite its location in downtown Kuala Lumpur, MaTiC is rather inaccessible by buses and subway. Moreover, Kuala Lumpur is not a pedestrian-friendly city. Taxis in Kuala Lumpur are also notorious for taking longer routes or tampering with the taxi meters. For tourists, it seems that ride-sharing applications are the only friendly means of transport to the tourism centre. MaTiC could consider regular bus pickups from accessible locations, including popular hotels, in hope to generate more crowd to the venue.
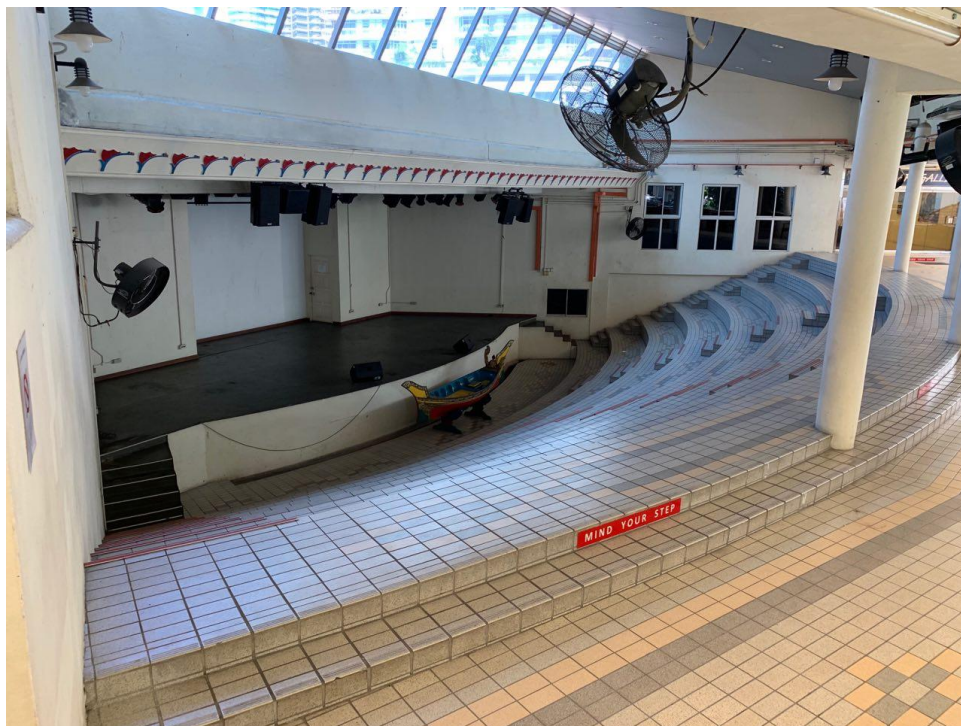

Figure 1: MaTiC's Amphitheater

Unlike place strategy, physical evidence strategy examines the physical cues in the provision of services (Masterson & Pickton, 2010). This may include the color scheme and ambience of offices and branches, uniform of the staff, and the look and feel of the physical structures and facilities. The amphitheater on site was extremely worn out, with a layer of dust on the stage, perhaps due to the lack of usage. Over the course of the participant observation, MaTiC's gallery was featuring an arts exhibition featuring the Malayan Tapir, a unique species of Tapirs found mainly in Malaysia and Indonesia. Using animals as a form of cultural representation, such as Pandas in China and Orangutans in Singapore, is not uncommon for tourism purposes. Nevertheless, the write-up of the exhibition was in the Malay language, suggesting the lack of consideration for tourists. The exhibition design was also unfriendly as there were rows of chairs placed right in front of paintings. It was not immediately obvious whether the chairs were there to prevent people from going too near the paintings, or for people to rest on. MaTiC needs to review the state of the facilities, and to ensure that the heritage building looks vibrant and lively as an attraction in its own right before it could receive positive word-of-mouth.
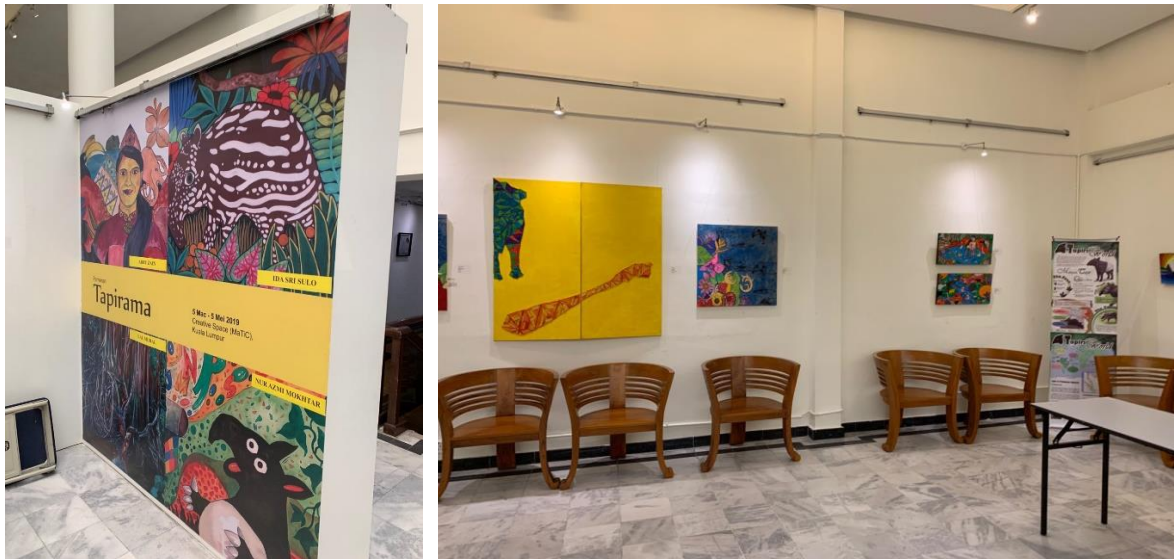

Figure 2: MaTiC's Gallery

Process strategy includes the ways in which consumers can come into contact with the providers of the products, as well as the steps required to complete the sales and the provision of after-sales services (Kumar, 2010). An effective process strategy is when organizations consider users' experience. In today's context, many processes are also closely linked to the digital and information age, which began in the 1980s (Kagami, 2003). The visitors' section of Tourism Malaysia's website features a list of Malaysia's attractions, experience, and activities in 13 different languages. Despite the multiple language offerings, the website remains a static information portal, with no interactivity built-in for their users. MOTAC could develop some interactive elements into Tourism Malaysia's visitors' site, such a visual preference survey to understand a visitor's inclinations, and eventually offer proposals of suitable attractions and activities. In this networked society, it is common for people to own at least a personal smartphone and/or a tablet. Apart from websites, it is becoming common for destinations to launch mobile applications for tourists. Similarly, such mobile applications could be highly interactive, possibly allowing visitors to link their locations and social media sites to the application. While mobile applications of tourist attractions and activities are

available in Malaysia, they are mostly information portal with little interactivity. Furthermore, only specific individual cities have their own applications, likely to be developed by their respective city councils. The lack of a Malaysia-wide tourism mobile application suggests MOTAC's myopia in the potential of collaborative tourism efforts across different states and cities.

MaTiC could also further enhance its experience for visitors through digital technologies. At the moment, visitors could pick up paper brochures of attractions and activities from the information centre. Next to the dedicated shelf filled with brochures are a bunch of standing banners for different events and activities happening in Malaysia, making the information centre very cluttered. There is also one static information board near the entrance of the building, which describes the building's history. MaTiC could consider setting up electronic kiosks for visitors to browse for information of attractions and activities based on the input of their preferences. There could be a virtual concierge, with voice recognition system built-in designated to answer questions of visitors. It is now also a possibility for attractions to incorporate augmented reality, where visitors can use applications on their smart phones or tablets cameras to enjoy enhanced experience in the destination (Cranmer, tom Dieck, & Jung, 2018). Along the same logic, MaTiC could create an application, which allows visitors to learn the history of the building by walking around the different spaces with their phone cameras turned on. Destinations could also be designed to be completely virtual in nature, allowing for a unique experience using very minimal spaces. For instance, while it is a good idea to incorporate live cultural performances daily, it would also help with visitors arriving beyond the show's timing to experience the performances through the help of virtual reality.

Figure 3: Information board at the entrance of MaTiC

4.2 Revisiting People Strategy - Lack of Cultural Diversity and Motivations within MOTAC

The service industry is dependent on people, and consumers often generate perceptions of the organizations based on the services offered by their staff representatives (Kumar, 2010). It is crucial that staff possess the knowledge, motivation, and attitude towards the needs of their consumers. Cultural diversity in a workplace, which refers to people from a variety of cultural backgrounds represented within the work environment, is highly essential (Thomas, 2008). Cultural diversity in the tourism sector emerged alongside technological development and globalization. With the advancement in technology, travel has also become more affordable. When people of different cultural backgrounds move around, cultures interact, and at times, produce tensions. It is therefore more crucial than ever for the tourism sector to hire a diverse workforce to ensure that that the needs of visitors of different cultural backgrounds are well taken care of, as a monoculture workforce might overlook complex cultural situations. A well-managed and culturally diverse workforce could become a real asset to the organization, in terms of enhancing innovation, competitiveness, knowledge transfer, and interest through a diverse image (Korjala, 2012).

From the secondary research of MOTAC's organizational structure and developmental policies, as well as the informal discussions with MaTiC's staff members on site, it could be deduced that there is a general lack of cultural diversity in the work environment of MOTAC. While Malaysia is branded as a multicultural, multi-religious country through the official tourism slogan of *Malaysia, Truly Asia*, the tourism ministry and its agencies have not advocated the same in terms of staffing. Even the daily cultural performances in MaTiC fail to consider diversity in the obvious absence of cultural performances of ethnic communities other than the Malays and indigenous groups. Often, cultural diversity is looked at from two layers. Primary differences, such as age, gender and race, are generally stable and fixed, and are unlikely to be substantially changed. Secondary differences, such as beliefs, class, education, and experience, could be self-enhanced and altered (Booysen, 2007). Generally, in Malaysia, the government service tends to attract a singular race educated mainly in the Malay language, suggesting a lack of cultural diversity at both layers. If not well-managed, cultural differences could lead to conflicts, which could tarnish MOTAC's reputation and operations, and eventually, affect the reputation of Malaysia. Should MOTAC considers to hire across diverse races, effective cross-cultural management strategies have to be put in place. By management, there needs to be long term strategic planning, allocation of resources to support the implementation of the plans, review and evaluation mechanisms, as well as strong leadership (Lewis, Goodman, Fandt & Michlitsch, 2007). Cross-cultural management goes beyond the mere understanding of the mentality of different staff members, but to incorporate the foreseeable differences into the day-to-day operations effectively.

There is also a clear lack of motivations and drive amongst the MaTiC's staff members. Prior to the start of the daily cultural performance, there was no staff members at the door to register and manage the audiences. A blank piece of paper and a pen was left on a table next to the entrance, with a small note requesting audiences to fills in only their names. This suggests a mis-opportunity to collect audiences' information. Upon entering the auditorium, two staff members, probably the ushers, could be seen sitting on the floor near the entrance, busy on their phones, and remained completely unperturbed by the audiences walking in. They continued on their phones throughout the hour-long performance. The emptiness of the souvenir shop was filled by the loud sound a drama series from the shopkeeper's tablet. My presence did not actually disrupt the shopkeeper's attention on her tablet. The tourist service centre was equally disappointing as the counters were left

unmanned for more than 30 minutes, even though it was a working day beyond lunch hours. Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory looks into what brings out satisfaction in a particular job, i.e. the motivators, and what causes dissatisfaction, also known as hygiene factors. Motivators include the job content, the satisfaction from completing a job, growth opportunity and recognition. Hygiene factors, on the other hand, focus on factors beyond job content, such as company policies, supervision, working conditions, salary, safety, and security on the job, to name a few (Saxena, 2005). To successfully engage their staff members, MOTAC has to seriously revisit both motivators and hygiene factors across its organizations.

4.3 Revisiting Product Strategy - Cultural Tourism as a way forward

Product strategy refers to the features and capabilities of the product that might be deemed as beneficial or of interest to the target segment (Hult, 2012). The secondary research suggests that Malaysia has clearly branded itself as a destination where tourists could expect multicultural and multi-religious exposure, and experience firsthand the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures and traditions. In 2019, one of MOTAC's initiatives was the visit to ITB Berlin, a world leading travel trade show. MOTAC showcased traditional performances representing the various ethnic groups and communities in Malaysia. The trade show also accentuated Malaysia's ecotourism and cultural attractions, which included birdwatching in Putrajaya, Sky Mirror in Selangor, Danum Valley in Sabah, heritage trails in Sarawak, as well as the famous UNESCO World Heritage Site in Penang. *Malaysia, Truly Asia* has been the slogan of Malaysia's tourism since the 1990s. This slogan represents clever marketing as it basically suggests that tourists could just choose a singular destination to experience a totality of Asia's cultures. Moreover, this slogan is bona fide, as Malaysia does indeed possess such diverse cultural constructs. Nevertheless, likewise other countries affected by globalization, it is impractical to expect the display of authentic cultural practices of the different ethnic groups in Malaysia under a normal day circumstance, except for specific ethic festivities. Tourists who yearn for an authentic cultural experience of traditions and histories in Malaysia are expected to visit Malaysia during festivities, or carry out self-initiated research to explore locations with traditional cultural practices.

Figure 4: Images of cultural performances inside MaTiC's auditorium

Despite MOTAC's meritorious initiatives to showcase Malaysia's culture through trade shows and daily performances in MaTiC, these efforts are ultimately spectacles, uprooted from their intended cultural sites, and purposefully created to be showcased in confined spaces. Given Malaysia's cultural resources, there is obvious potential for the development of cultural tourism. Since MOTAC is a governmental ministry incorporating culture and tourism, there should ideally be more synergies between the two components. Indeed, one of MOTAC's objectives is to synergize arts, culture, and heritage as catalysts of Malaysia's tourism. Yet, there are very few actual initiatives at the ministerial level promoting this synergy. Based on the Ministry's website, current tourism efforts seem to focus more on education tourism, agro-tourism, and sport tourism. The fact is that Malaysia has a vibrant arts and cultural scene that is rather independent of MOTAC's influence. Hence, beyond curating cultural presentations, MOTAC needs to reconsider how to actively engage and promote existing cultural productions happening around Malaysia.

Regarded as one of the major pillars of the tourism industry, cultural heritage tourism, or cultural tourism, is oriented towards the cultural heritage of the location where tourism activities are taken place. The National Trust for Historic Preservation defines cultural heritage tourism as "travelling to experience the places, artefacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and heritage tourism can include cultural, historic and natural resources" (Bassetta, Fatta, & Manti, 2017). Cultural tourism has been strategically manifested through a wealth of heritage sites, historical monuments, colorful festivals, exotic cuisines, the arts and etc. Based on the report by OECD (2009), cultural tourism is one of the largest-growing global tourism markets. In Southeast Asia, for instance, renowned historical locations such as Siem Reap in Cambodia, Luang Prabang in Laos, Borobudur in Indonesia, and Ayutthaya in Thailand are developing their cultural resources as a unique selling point and competitive advantages in cultural heritage tourism markets.

Preserving culture and heritage for tourism purposes is not without problems. On the onset, the whole concept seems to reduce culture and heritage of a destination to a commodity to be consumed for the tourism dollars (Cohen, 1988). Having a huge influx of tourists coming in contact with a local culture heritage could also bring about potential dissatisfactions or even exploitations of the local communities, resulting in a dilution of the culture heritage itself. One example is the exploitation of Filipina Maria Oggay, who is oldest traditional Kalinga tattooist. Rumor has it that Maria was presented as a circus spectacle in events organized for commercial tourism purposes. Governments and cultural heritage organizations are responsible in seeking academically trained professionals with contextual knowledge and strategic management capabilities to manage cultural tourism effectively. The unavailability of academic training and research in cultural heritage tourism in Malaysia's higher education has probably contributed to the lack of the sector's development.

5. CONCLUSION

From the findings and discussions, it could be deduced that the top-down tourism management in Malaysia requires further improvements. Some of the problems are inherent, such as the lack of diversity and motivations of the workforce. Effecting changes in diversity and motivations require strategic human resource planning, and organizational reforms. Other problems, such as the physical evidence and processes of MaTiC, could be resolved promptly with some enhancements, including the incorporation of technologies at multiple levels. On the whole, MOTAC needs to reconsider how best to use Malaysia's rich cultural resources to develop the competencies of cultural tourism. It is hoped that the outcomes of this research

benefit MOTAC and its relevant departments/ agencies, as well as contribute to the limited literature and readings on the development of tourism and cultural tourism in Malaysia. Tourism, today, operates on a multi-scalar level, where there is a need for joint efforts between a myriad of stakeholders domestically, and internationally. The top-down management of the tourism sector needs to balance alongside bottom-up initiatives. Educational institutions, business and commerce associations, hotels and restaurants, attractions and tour operations, as well as arts and cultural stakeholders need to be animated to play more crucial roles in shaping the future development of Malaysia's tourism sector.

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