

## **THE CULTURE OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN MALAYSIA: A STUDY OF ECO-TOURISM IN LANGKAWI**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Conservation of heritage resources requires immense human effort; more so now if it has become a necessity for socio-economic development and ultimately human survival. However, humans can no longer work in silo and social isolation for conservation. Instead, they have to work together to conserve natural and cultural resources as much as they can, as hard as they can. However, as rapid urbanisation and modernisation can create challenges in heritage conservation despite technological advancement, more human effort is required than before. Humans can get back to age old efforts that have withstood test and time, i.e. efforts that are cultural and social in nature. The creation of a culture of heritage conservation is one such effort. Shared values, shared norms and cultural practices are common denominators for a culture of heritage conservation. Amongst various forms of cultural practices, social networking as a form that is common to all societies. Social networking that is based on social relationships is an inevitable fact of everyday social living in any society. Malaysian society is no different from any society in this sense, more so with valuable natural and cultural heritage resources to conserve. This article presents and discusses some findings from an empirical research on the presence of a culture of heritage conservation that facilitates a socio-economic activity, i.e. eco-tourism, in some parts of Langkawi. Langkawi which is acknowledged as a geopark by UENSCO is an archipelago of islands that is situated in the north of Peninsular Malaysia. The research found that the culture is based on particular shared values and shared norms that have been contributing to the growth of eco-tourism in the main island of Langkawi. The values and norms become the foundation of particular social networks among stakeholders involved in the eco-tourism. That networks eventually sustain and facilitate their social networking process. Hence, social networks are confirmed a key element in the cultural practice of social networking for organising and mobilising stakeholders to work together so that future generation can continue to reap the benefits of heritage conservation through eco-tourism while sustaining heritage resources.

**Keywords:** Culture, Heritage Conservation, Social Networks, Eco-tourism stakeholders

### **INTRODUCTION**

Conservation of heritage resources, in Malaysia or elsewhere in the world, requires immense human effort; more so now if it has become a necessity for socio-economic development and ultimately sustainable development for human survival (Aas, Ladkin & Fletcher 2005; Caspersen 2009; Enrique 2005; Halimatun Saadiah Hashim et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2010; Sarah Aziz et. al. 2013; Halimatun Saadiah Hashim et. al. 2013; Leeuwis 2000; Machado et al. 2002); Kolleck, de Haan Gerhard & Fischbach 2011). However, humans can no longer work in silo and social isolation for conservation. Instead, they have to work together to conserve natural and cultural resources as much as they can, as hard as they can. This typically results in formation of various social groups who share a common goal regarding heritage

conservation for sustainable development (Halimaton Saadiah Hashim et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2011; Sarah Aziz et. al. 2013; Halimaton Saadiah Hashim et. al. 2013).

Public awareness of the importance of heritage conservation for sustainable socio-economic development has heightened in Malaysia over the past few years (Halimaton Saadiah Hashim et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2011; Sarah Aziz et. al. 2013; Halimaton Saadiah Hashim et. al. 2013; Chan & Halimaton Saadiah Hashim 2013; Chan 2014; Rahimah Abdul Aziz & Halimaton Saadiah Hashim 2014; Williard 2009). Therefore, various groups of humans who reside or have organisational links in targetted places of heritage conservation for sustainable development such as Langkawi have been gearing up to come together to work together to conserve key resources located in that place (Chan et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2011; Chan & Halimaton Saadiah Hashim 2013; Chan 2014; Williard 2009) Efforts made are both formal and informal in nature; formal if government authorities, the private sector and non-government organisations are involved and informal if individuals and members of communities made the effort.

Langkawi is an archipelago of islands situated in the northern state of Kedah in Peninsular Malaysia ( Geopark and Conservation Division, Langkawi Development Authority (LADA), undated). Its rich in geological, ecological, biological and cultural resources contribute to local socio-economic and sustainable development. As such, Global Geopark Networks (GGN) which is a network formed as an initiative under the United Nations declared Langkawi a geopark in 2007( Geopark and Conservation Division, Langkawi Development Authority (LADA), undated). It was the first geopark in Malaysia and in Southeast Asia. A geopark is a geographically designated area that contains geological, ecological, historical and cultural resources for community sustainable development primarily through tourism activities ( Geopark and Conservation Division, Langkawi Development Authority (LADA), undated).

Since 2007, the government, private sectors, non-governmental organisations and local communities in Langkawi have been working together in many geopark programmes, projects and activities related to heritage conservation and sustainable development mainly through tourism and eco-tourism (Halimaton Saadiah Hashim et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2011; Sarah Aziz et. al. 2013; Halimaton Saadiah Hashim et. al. 2013; Chan & Halimaton Saadiah Hashim 2013; Chan 2014; Rahimah Abdul Aziz & Halimaton Saadiah Hashim 2014). According to Chan (2017), various parties get involved through a top down governance system while other parties work together in a bottom up approach, or independently of one another for specific projects and activities (see also Chan et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2011; Chan et. al. 2015; Chan et. al. 2016). Some bottom-up approaches are usually social and informal in nature they are carried out by groups of people from all walks of life. Local communities are normally involved. Hence, community participation is no longer uncommon in Langkawi geopark projects, activities or programmes.

Langkawi, as in other parts of Malaysia, has been undergoing rapid urbanisation and modernisation. As that can create challenges to heritage conservation despite technological advancement, more human effort is required than before (see Chan et. al. 2015; Chan et. al. 2016). Malaysians, Langkawians and other people who have links to Langkawi can get back to age old efforts that have withstood test and time, i.e. efforts that are cultural and social in nature. The creation of a culture of heritage conservation is one such effort. If such culture has already existed in Langkawi, then firstly it must be consensually acknowledged by its people and authorities, and then developed for effective operationalisation in heritage conservation efforts.

## **SOCIAL NETWORKS, SOCIAL NETWORKING AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN LANGKAWI**

Shared values, shared norms and cultural practices are common denominators for the creation of any culture by human society. An example is the culture of heritage conservation. Any culture has its own practices; hence various cultures have various cultural practices. Amongst them is social networking, i.e. a practice that allows humans to create social links or ties between themselves to achieve shared goals; this including heritage conservation. Therefore, social networking is based on social links or ties, otherwise known as social relationships. Social networking is a form of cultural practice that is common to all societies (see Chan, et. al. 2015; Chan et.al. 2016). Social networking is considered a cultural practice as it requires shared values and shared norms to develop the social relationships for networking. The values and norms may then strengthen the relationships and sustains the networking practice. In the case of Langkawi, heritage conservation is made possible by social networking between stakeholders and custodians who share certain values and norms concerning the importance of heritage conservation not only for Langkawi' current social-economic growth but for the benefit of its future generations (Chan 2017).

Social networks are a series of interlinking social relations between two or more individuals (Borgatti & Everett 2013; Chan & Mohamad Zaki Ibrahim 2008; Chan 2009; Chan et. al. 2010; Chan et. al. 2011, Chan et. al. 2016; Scott 1991;). The individuals create the networks to achieve or obtain something they cannot do or get on their own independently of others (Borgatti & Everett 2013, Christakis & Fowler 2009, Field 2003). Thus, social networks are beneficial social constructs. They are about connectedness that can bring benefits to those who build the connections. Social networks can be ties or relationships between people, between organisations or between people and organisations (Borgatti & Everett 2013, Scott 1991, Wasserman & Faust 1994). They allow the connected individuals do something together, for instance cooperate, coordinate or collaborate to achieve a common goal or fulfil a common need. As such, social networks are mechanisms for social behaviour such as mutual influence, cooperation, coordination or collaboration.

Social networks are also cultural constructs when networking becomes a cultural practice based on shared values, shared norms and tradition. In the case of Langkawi geopark, the shared values and shared norms relate to heritage conservation for sustainable development. Cooperation and influence between the interconnected individuals is made possible by shared values and shared norms (see Chan 2015; Chan et. al. 2015; Chan et. al. 2016). For Langkawi to continue to be a successful and economically sustainable geopark, heritage conservation for sustainable development through eco-tourism can be further improved through continuous active cooperation influence between all parties.

This paper presents and discusses some findings from an empirical research on the culture of heritage conservation for an eco-tourism activity conducted by community members in a village in Langkawi (see Chan 2015; Chan et. al. 2015; Chan et. al. 2016). The research employed social network analysis methodology and theory. The following section will elaborate on this methodology. The findings confirmed that a culture of heritage conservation has been in existence among the community members who have been involved in the eco-tourism activity all these years (see Chan et. al. 2015; Chan et. al. 2016). That culture is based on particular shared values and shared norms related to heritage conservation. They are found to sustain and facilitate the social networking process, especially cooperation and influence while the activity took place (see also Chan 2015; Chan et. al. 2015; Chan et. al. 2016). The culture has been contributing to the growth of the eco-tourism activity since it began. The

values and norms are discussed in the findings section of this paper. Members benefit from their social networks. Therefore, this paper argues that social networks become a key cultural practice to organise and mobilise societal members in Malaysia to constantly network and work together so that future generation can continue to reap the benefits of heritage conservation through eco-tourism while sustaining heritage resources.

## **SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS AS THE METHODOLOGY TO STUDY THE CULTURE OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION FOR ECO-TOURISM ACTIVITY IN LANGKAWI GEOPARK**

Social network analysis was the methodology employed to analyse the culture of heritage conservation for an eco-tourism activity conducted by villagers in Village A in Langkawi. This methodology was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches that were guided by a combination of inductive-deductive-abductive-retroductive research strategies. Community members in Village A in Langkawi were the main units of analysis. Also called social network actors or “nodes” in social network analysis, they were selected for their participation on eco-tourism activities linked to sustainable geopark development in their Village A. Their names are concealed for research ethical purposes. Their relationships are called “lines” and they are visually portrayed in network graphs.

A literature review to develop an initial set of behavioural indicators of cooperation, assistance and influence based on shared values and shared norms was the deductive part of the study. Key ideas from a social network theory on similarities between actors are also applied. Following that, the indicators were tested in the interview process during a pilot study. That transformed the study into inductive-abductive study. This approach produced socially constructed meanings concerning shared values and norms in geopark activities and projects. Following that, the indicators were finalised for use in the actual fieldwork. That was the retroductive part of the study. During the fieldwork, the informants filled in a particular questionnaire that contained several matrix tables filled with the finalised indicators. Therefore, the main methods of data collection were in-depth interviews and survey conducted during the fieldwork.

Systematic content analysis and social network analysis were the methods of data analysis. Social network analysis is a method of based on graph theory that traces and analyses patterns of networks in a qualitative and quantitative manner (Borgatti et. al. 2013, Scott 1991, Wasserman & Faust 1994). Network graphs (or sociograms) will tell who is linked to who based on what, and how strong, weak or close are the relationships are the results from the analysis. In the Langkawi study, the network graphs were shaped by several shared values and shared norms in terms of influence, cooperation and assistance for effective participation in geopark activities, including eco-tourism ones.

During the fieldwork, the informants were required to fill in the questionnaire. Raw data was generated and inputted into EXCEL files. The EXCEL data was then transferred in a computerised social network analysis software called UCINET 6 that analysed the social network patterns based on shared values, shared norms and other shared aspects. UCINET 6 is able to analyse network patterns of single actors. This sort of analysis is called ego-centred network analysis. The network graphs demonstrate the varying levels of strengths, weakness and closeness of relationships through varying thickness of the lines. The more sharing (or similarities) or values and norms the network actors have, the thicker the lines linking them and the stronger and closer the relationships. The kinds of similarities are represented in numbers. This means that in order to work together to cooperate and influence one another, the

actors created social networks between themselves based on shared values, shared norms and other shared aspects.

## **FINDINGS ON THE CULTURE OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN AN ECO-TOURISM ACTIVITY IN VILLAGE A IN LANGKAWI**

The research found that the villages who were network actors participated actively as tourist boat operators, boat owners or boat operators employed by the boat owners. The following graphs show an example of a network work graph for Actor Maswadi in Village A (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Hence, boat operations for eco-tourism were the activities focused in the study. Interesting patterns of shared values, shared norms that supported the social networks were found among the members of Village A who were actively involved in boat operations in their village. In the first village, Village A, 22 network actors were identified but this paper shall not present findings of all 22 actors.

Key shared values identified were trust and loyalty while other shared aspects were knowledge (cognition), emotion, viewpoints, experiences and place of residences. Most of these actors were friends, relatives, neighbours, employers and employees. Therefore, the types of social networks were friendship networks, family ties, neighbour networks and work ties. These types of social networks have been established prior to participation in eco-tourism. Some networks were pre-existing and familial in nature. The shared values and other shared aspects acted as a foundation for shared norms. The shared norms were in the form similar behaviours such as influencing, the offering of assistance and demonstrating cooperation by way of showing participation in the eco-tourism activities. Various other reasons for the shared norms or behaviours to occur were the need to generate revenue, increase in family socio-economic status, increase in village's socio-economic status, new work opportunity, heritage conservation, benefits for future generation, economic development of the village, tourist promotion, assistance to friends and family members, promotion of villages to tourists, boat operator replacement, similar community association membership, similar work, promote boat operation to tourists, expertise in boat operation and others. The shared values and norms actually reinforced existing and pre-existing social networks.

This section reveals selected examples of network graphs of cooperation, assistance and influence of some villagers in Village A. In the graphs, the varying thickness of the lines linking the actors represents varying types of shared values and shared norms of influence, assistance and cooperation among the actors in both villages. The thicker the lines, the more number of similarities the actors had, and the stronger their social networks for participation in eco-tourism activities in the villages through influence, assistance and cooperation.

Figure 1: Social Networks of Influence of Actor Maswadi in Village A

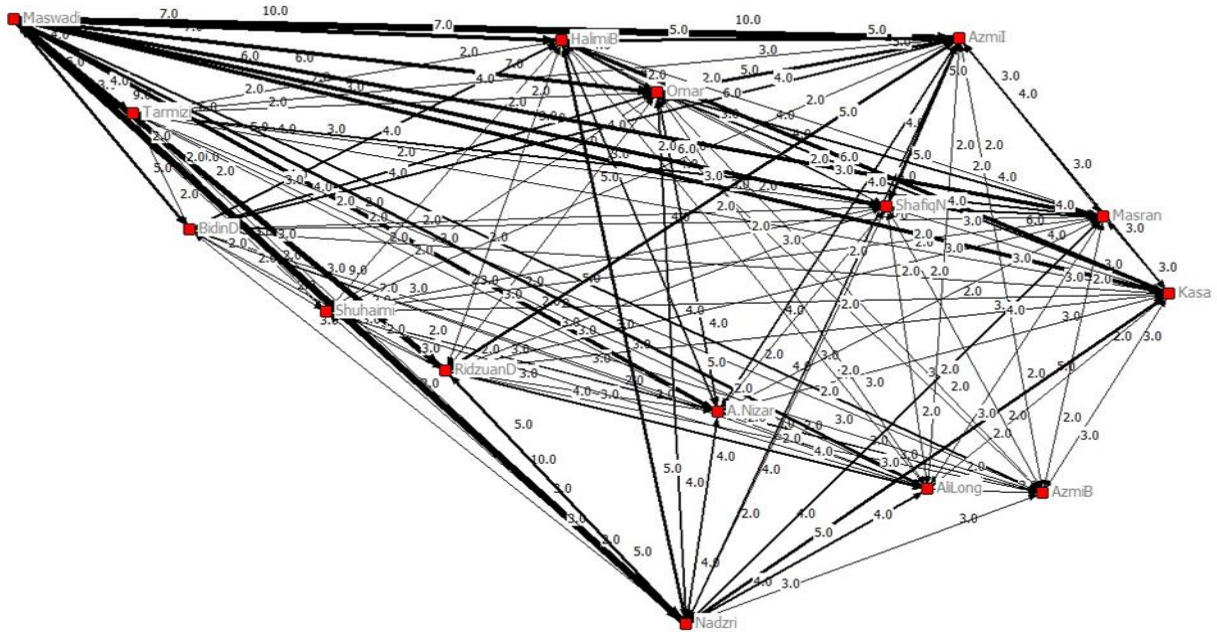
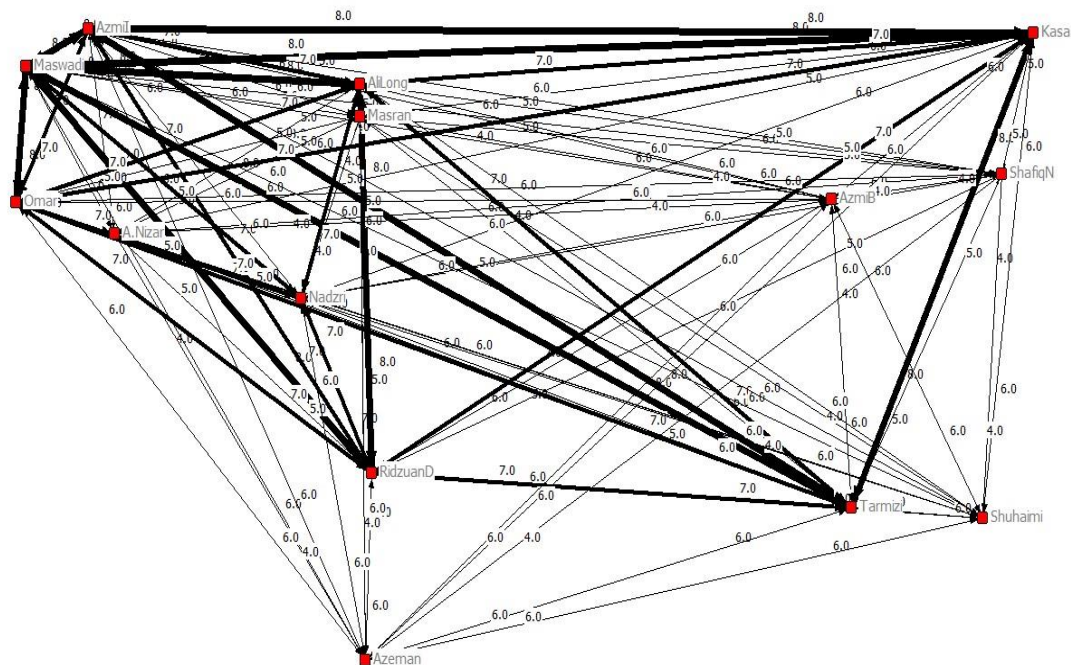


Figure 2: Social Networks of Assistance and Cooperation of Actor Maswadi in Village A



## CONCLUSION

The above findings have confirmed the presence of a culture of heritage conservation for an eco-tourism activity related to heritage conservation for sustainable development in a Village A in Langkawi. The culture was based on shared values and shared norms among villagers who were involved in the lucrative activity. These cultural aspects facilitated a key cultural practice i.e. networking based on social networks. The shared values discovered were trust and loyalty while shared norms were shared behaviours such as influence, assistance and cooperation. These norms were guided by the shared values.

Theoretically and practically, the culture of heritage conservation, the shared values and norms, and the social networks have indeed contributed significantly the operation of the eco-tourism activity in the Village A in Langkawi. Hence, social networks are confirmed a key element in the cultural practice of social networking for organising and mobilising stakeholders to work together so that future generation can continue to reap the benefits of heritage conservation through eco-tourism while sustaining heritage resources in Langkawi. More importantly, the social networks and networking process will continue to contribute to the sustainability of Langkawi as a geopark for as long the eco-tourism facilitated by social networks sustains.

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