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Assessing Indigenous Cultural Heritage Knowledge as a Foundation for Indigenous Tourism Development among the Bajau Community in Mabul and Larapan Islands, Sabah

* ¹ Mohamad Pirdaus Yusoh , ² Normah Abdul Latip , ³ Haziqah Nursyahirah Joshep , ⁴ Muhammad Fuad Abdullah

¹ Department of Tourism, Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Kelantan, Malaysia,

^{2&3} Borneo Institute for Indigenous Studies (BorIIS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

⁴ Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 42300 Puncak Alam, Malaysia & Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

¹ E-mail: pirdaus.y@umk.edu.my, ² E-mail: normah.abdullatip@ums.edu.my, ³ E-mail: haziqahnursyahirah@gmail.com

Abstract

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This study examines indigenous cultural heritage knowledge as a foundation for indigenous tourism development among the Bajau community in Mabul and Larapan Islands, Sabah, Malaysia. Indigenous tourism has gained increasing attention as a pathway for cultural preservation and tourism diversification, particularly in communities with rich traditional heritage. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through structured questionnaires involving 30 Bajau respondents from the two island communities. The study assessed knowledge across key cultural heritage dimensions, including traditional food, crafts, performing arts, festivals, attire, and ceremonial customs. The findings reveal strong indigenous cultural knowledge in both communities, with respondents from Mabul generally demonstrating higher levels of cultural knowledge retention compared to those from Larapan. The results highlight the potential of Bajau cultural heritage as a valuable resource for developing authentic indigenous tourism experiences that complement existing marine-based tourism in Sabah. This study contributes to the growing discourse on indigenous tourism by providing empirical insights into the role of cultural heritage knowledge in supporting culturally grounded tourism development within island-based indigenous communities.

Keywords: Indigenous tourism; Bajau ethnic community; Community development; Island tourism; Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Tourism plays a pivotal role in the socio-economic development of Sabah, particularly for rural and island communities whose livelihoods are intrinsically tied to their natural and cultural assets. Demonstrating a strong post-pandemic recovery, Sabah recorded approximately 2.61 million visitor arrivals in 2023, reaffirming the sector as a cornerstone of the state economy (Sabah Tourism Board, 2023). Concurrently, tourism-related activities continue to generate substantial employment and income, specifically in destinations driven by natural and cultural attractions (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2024). Despite this macroscopic growth, indigenous communities such as the Bajau ethnic group who are custodians of rich maritime traditions, cultural heritage, and traditional ecological knowledge continue to face marginalisation and limited participation in formal tourism activities. This systemic exclusion raises significant concerns regarding equitable benefit distribution and the underutilisation of unique indigenous cultural assets. Consequently, it underscores an urgent need for inclusive tourism development frameworks that champion community empowerment, local agency, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge system.

Indigenous tourism has emerged globally as a pathway for cultural preservation, inclusive development, and community empowerment (Hinch & Butler, 2007; Carr et al., 2021). However, in Malaysia, particularly in Sabah, indigenous tourism remains relatively underdeveloped, with tourism activities predominantly centred on marine recreation and commercially driven island tourism (Latip et al., 2018; Sukri et al., 2024). Islands such as Mabul and Larapan demonstrate strong cultural authenticity and rich indigenous knowledge systems, yet structured mechanisms to translate these assets into sustainable tourism products remain limited. This gap underscores the need to investigate the relationship between cultural knowledge, community readiness, and tourism potential among indigenous groups. Understanding these dimensions is essential, as indigenous tourism development should not merely focus on destination attractiveness but also on the capacity of local communities to participate meaningfully in tourism planning and benefit equitably from tourism-related opportunities (Ibrahim et al., 2023). In this context, examining the indigenous Bajau community in Semporna offers valuable insights into how traditional knowledge and cultural heritage may serve as strategic resources for sustainable tourism development and rural socio-economic empowerment. (Aziz Amen & Ahmad

NIA, 2021; Yusoh et al., 2023) Effective integration strategies must prioritize structured training programs and community-led empowerment initiatives to transform these unique cultural assets into viable, long-term economic opportunities (Yusoh et al., 2023).

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the limited empirical literature on indigenous tourism development in East Malaysia, particularly by addressing the theoretical gap concerning the role of indigenous knowledge as a foundation for community-based tourism development. Despite increasing scholarly attention on sustainable and community-oriented tourism, empirical studies examining the readiness and tourism potential of indigenous island communities in Sabah remain limited. From a practical perspective, understanding grassroots readiness, community participation, and existing cultural strengths is essential for designing inclusive tourism strategies that not only improve local livelihoods but also strengthen cultural identity and enhance long-term community resilience. Therefore, this study aims to assess the role of indigenous cultural knowledge as a foundation for indigenous tourism development among the Bajau ethnic community in Mabul and Larapan Islands. Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1. To evaluate the level of indigenous cultural knowledge among the Bajau community in Mabul and Larapan Islands.
2. To compare the distribution of indigenous cultural knowledge between the two island communities.
3. To identify cultural heritage elements with potential for indigenous tourism development.

This study is grounded in three interconnected elements: indigenous cultural knowledge, community readiness, and the socio-economic potential of indigenous tourism. These components are rooted in existing paradigms of indigenous tourism, community-based tourism (CBT), and the protection of cultural heritage. Indigenous tourism is typically defined as rooted in the cultural traditions, knowledge systems, and heritage of Indigenous peoples. Hinch and Butler, (2007) assert that indigenous tourism must be culturally rooted and either governed or significantly shared by the Indigenous community to guarantee authenticity and sustainability. The Bajau community in Sabah possesses a cultural identity influenced by marine heritage, ceremonial practices, craftsmanship, culinary traditions, and performing arts, which have been recognised as unique assets with significant tourism potential (Joshep et al., 2025; Latip et al., 2018). Indigenous knowledge constitutes the foundation of cultural tourism. Research in Sabah suggests that indigenous knowledge is commonly transmitted through oral traditions, family interactions, community practices, traditional songs, dances, myths, and rituals, thereby facilitating the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional skills across generations (Adam et al., 2022). Craft traditions, such as wood carving and woven items, are recognized as economically significant cultural assets that contribute to tourism development in Malaysia.

Cultural performances and ceremonial apparel, including Igal-Igal, Badu dress, and wedding rituals, are essential to indigenous identity and the development of tourism experiences (Mahadi & Mohamad, 2020). Community readiness constitutes a crucial element in indigenous tourism development. The CBT framework emphasises community involvement, local empowerment, and cultural preservation as critical prerequisites for sustainable tourism. In island and coastal regions, tourism has been promoted as an alternative livelihood strategy to reduce local communities' dependence on declining marine resources, particularly among small island communities facing economic and environmental vulnerabilities (Praptiwi et al., 2021). The successful execution of indigenous tourism necessitates cultural assets, as well as community willingness, capability, and socio-economic incentives. This study delineates the potential of indigenous tourism within the Bajau communities of Mabul and Larapan as encompassing three interconnected dimensions: (1) Indigenous cultural knowledge, which includes culinary heritage, craftsmanship, traditional attire, and performance arts; (2) Community engagement and preparedness, indicating readiness to participate in tourism-related endeavours; and (3) Anticipated socio-economic advantages, pertaining to expectations of revenue generation, skill enhancement, and improved living standards. This conceptualisation aligns with contemporary research on community-based indigenous tourism, highlighting the integration of cultural authenticity, local agency, and socio-economic development (Aziz et al., 2020).

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative research design to assess the potential of indigenous tourism development among the Bajau ethnic community in Mabul and Larapan Islands, Semporna, Sabah. A survey approach was adopted to collect data on indigenous cultural knowledge, community participation and readiness, as well as perceptions of the socio-economic potential of indigenous tourism. The study was conducted in two island communities, namely Mabul Island and Larapan Island, located in the Semporna district of Sabah, Malaysia. These locations were purposively selected due to their strong Bajau population, rich indigenous cultural heritage, and relevance to the study objectives in examining indigenous tourism potential within island communities.

A total of 30 respondents participated in the study, comprising 15 respondents from Mabul Island and 15 respondents from Larapan Island. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, targeting local Bajau community members with lived experience and familiarity with indigenous cultural practices and tourism-related activities. This sampling approach was considered appropriate for exploratory community-based studies involving specific indigenous populations (Ibrahim et al., 2023). As this study represents a preliminary exploratory assessment of indigenous tourism potential within a specific indigenous community, a small purposive sample was considered appropriate for generating initial insights and identifying key development opportunities. The primary objective of the study was not to generalize findings to the wider population, but rather to obtain context-specific perspectives from members of the Bajau community regarding indigenous tourism development. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, with measurement items adapted from previous studies on indigenous tourism development, community participation, and sustainable tourism. The questionnaire comprised sections on demographic information, cultural and indigenous knowledge, community

readiness and participation, and perceived socio-economic development potential. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistical analysis, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, was employed to examine response patterns and assess the tourism development potential within the selected communities.

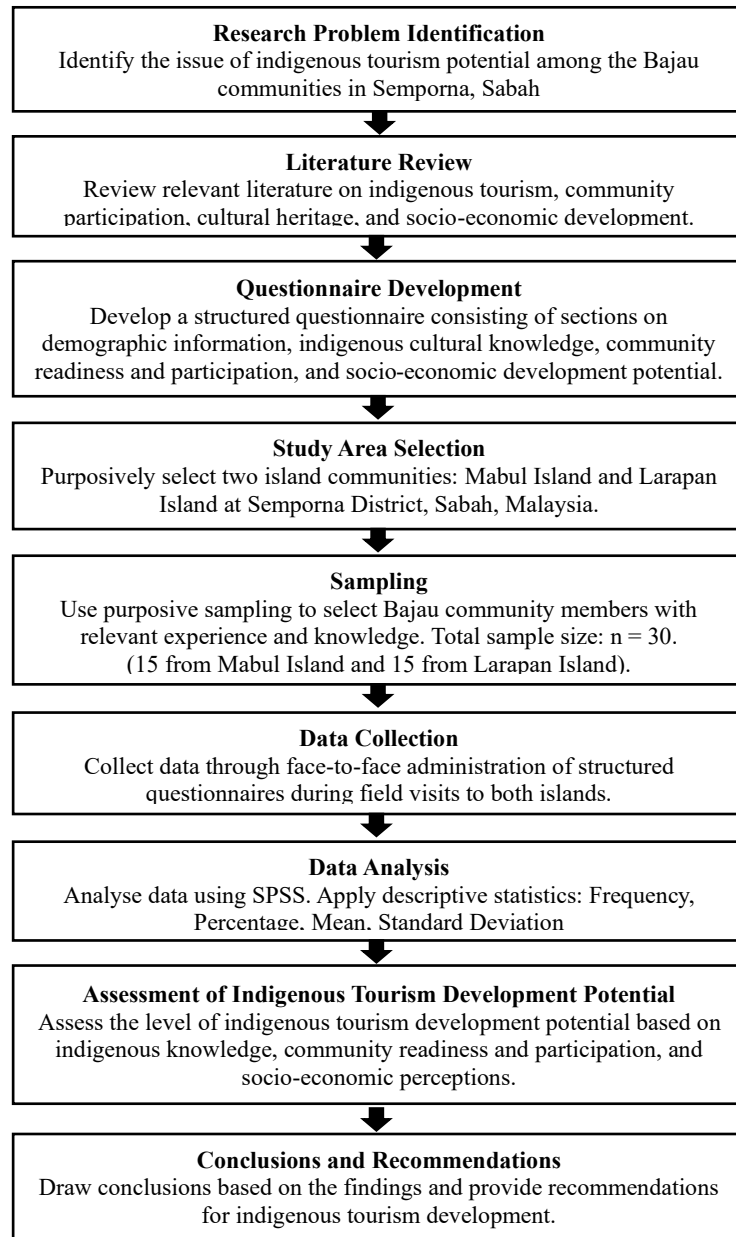


Figure 1. Research Methodology Framework. (Developed by the Authors).

Figure 1 illustrates the overall methodological framework adopted in this study. The research process began with the identification of the research problem and a review of relevant literature on indigenous tourism, community participation, and sustainable tourism development. A structured questionnaire was subsequently developed and administered to selected Bajau community members in Mabul and Laraman Islands through purposive sampling. The collected data were analysed using SPSS through descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The findings were then used to assess the indigenous tourism development potential and formulate appropriate conclusions and recommendations.

3. Results

3.1 Profile of the respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents from Mabul and Laraman Islands. A total of 30 respondents participated in the study, with 15 respondents from each island. Female respondents constituted the majority in Mabul Island (60.0%), while Laraman Island recorded a slightly higher proportion of male respondents (53.3%). In terms of age, the largest proportion of respondents from both islands were aged between 21 and 30 years (33.3%). Regarding ethnicity, the majority of respondents were from the Bajau ethnic group, representing 80.0% in Mabul and 100% in Laraman, while

a minority of respondents in Mabul identified as Suluk (20.0%). In terms of estimated monthly income, most respondents from Larapan earned less than RM500 per month (86.7%), whereas respondents from Mabul showed a relatively broader income distribution, with the highest proportion earning between RM501 and RM1000 (40.0%).

Table 1: Respondent Profile.

Variable	Category	Mabul Island		Larapan Island	
		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	6	40.0	8	53.3
	Female	9	60.0	7	46.7
Age	Below 20 years old	1	6.7	3	20.0
	21 - 30 years old	5	33.3	5	33.3
	31 - 40 years old	4	26.7	3	20.0
	41 - 50 years old	1	6.7	4	26.7
	51 years old and above	4	26.7	-	-
Ethnicity	Bajau	12	80.0	15	100
	Suluk	3	20.0	-	-
Estimated Monthly Income	Less than RM500	4	26.7	13	86.7
	RM501- RM1000	6	40.0	-	-
	RM1001-RM2000	5	33.3	2	13.3

3.2 Knowledge of Traditional Food

Table 2 presents respondents' knowledge of traditional Bajau food in Mabul and Larapan Islands. Overall, respondents from Mabul demonstrated consistently high levels of knowledge regarding traditional food items, including *Sagol* ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$), *Kilau* ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$), and *Penjaram* ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.03$). This indicates strong familiarity with traditional food heritage within the Mabul community.

In comparison, respondents from Larapan also demonstrated awareness of traditional Bajau food, although with relatively lower mean scores and greater variation. Knowledge of *Kilau* and *Penjaram* recorded similar mean scores ($M = 4.26$), while *Sagol* showed the lowest mean score ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.78$), suggesting less consistent familiarity among respondents. Overall, the findings indicate stronger preservation of traditional food knowledge among respondents in Mabul compared to Larapan.

Table 2: Knowledge of traditional Bajau food.

Type of Indigenous Knowledge	Island	Mean	Std
I know about Sagol	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	3.80	1.78
I know about Kilau	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	4.26	1.03
I know about Penjaram	Mabul	4.73	1.03
	Larapan	4.26	1.38

3.3 Knowledge of Traditional Crafts and Tools

Table 3 presents respondents' knowledge of traditional crafts and tools in Mabul and Larapan Islands. Respondents from Mabul demonstrated consistently high levels of knowledge across all traditional craft indicators, including pandan mats ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$), replica *Lepa-Lepa* boats ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$), and mini boat carvings ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.04$). These findings indicate strong familiarity with traditional craft-related cultural heritage among the Mabul community.

In comparison, respondents from Larapan reported relatively lower mean scores across all indicators. Knowledge of replica *Lepa-Lepa* boats recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.82$), followed by mini boat carvings ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.96$), while knowledge of pandan mats showed the lowest mean score ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.49$). Overall, the findings suggest that knowledge of traditional crafts and tools is more strongly retained among respondents in Mabul compared to Larapan.

Table 3: Knowledge of Traditional Crafts and Tools.

Type of Indigenous Knowledge	Island	Mean	Std
I know about pandan mats	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	3.66	1.49
I know about Mini Boat Carvings	Mabul	4.66	1.04
	Larapan	4.06	0.96
I know about Replica Lepa-lepa boats	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	4.40	0.82

3.4 Knowledge of Traditional Dances and Festivals

Table 4 presents respondents' knowledge of traditional dances and festivals in Mabul and Larapan Islands. Respondents from Mabul demonstrated consistently high levels of knowledge regarding the *Igal-Igal* dance ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$), *Daling-Daling* dance ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$), and the *Regatta Lepa* festival ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$). However, knowledge

regarding individuals who could teach traditional Bajau dances recorded a comparatively lower mean score ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.50$).

Similarly, respondents from Larapan demonstrated strong knowledge of the *Regatta Lepa* festival ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.41$), indicating high awareness of this cultural event. Knowledge of traditional dances was relatively lower, with mean scores of 4.00 ($SD = 1.46$) for the *Igal-Igal* dance and 3.93 ($SD = 1.33$) for the *Daling-Daling* dance. In contrast, respondents from Larapan reported a higher awareness of individuals who could teach traditional Bajau dances ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.38$). Overall, the findings indicate strong knowledge of traditional dances and festivals in both communities, with some variations across specific cultural elements.

Table 4: Knowledge of Traditional Dances and Festivals.

Type of Indigenous Knowledge	Island	Mean	Std
I know about the Igal-Igal dance	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	4.00	1.46
I know about the Daling-daling dance	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	3.93	1.33
I know about the Regatta Lepa festival	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	4.80	0.41
I know who can teach me traditional Bajau dances	Mabul	3.53	1.50
	Larapan	4.26	1.38

3.5 Knowledge of Traditional Attire and Wedding Customs

Table 5 presents respondents' knowledge of traditional attire and wedding customs in Mabul and Larapan Islands. Respondents from Mabul demonstrated consistently high levels of knowledge across all indicators, including traditional *Ala Bimbang* attire ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$), traditional *Badu* attire ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$), and traditional Bajau wedding customs ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.51$).

Similarly, respondents from Larapan also reported high levels of knowledge in this dimension, with the highest mean score recorded for traditional Bajau wedding customs ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.74$), followed by traditional *Ala Bimbang* attire ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.82$) and traditional *Badu* attire ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.61$). Overall, the findings indicate strong preservation of knowledge related to traditional attire and ceremonial customs in both communities.

Table 5: Knowledge of Traditional Attire and Wedding Customs.

Type of Indigenous Knowledge	Island	Mean	Std
I know about the Traditional Ala Bimbang attire	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	4.40	0.82
I know about the Traditional Badu attire	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	4.33	0.61
I know about traditional Bajau wedding customs	Mabul	4.86	0.51
	Larapan	4.53	0.74

4. Discussion

4.1 Indigenous Cultural Knowledge as a Foundation for Tourism Development

The findings demonstrate that the Bajau communities in both Mabul and Larapan possess substantial indigenous cultural knowledge across multiple cultural dimensions, including traditional food, crafts, performing arts, festivals, attire, and ceremonial customs. This suggests that indigenous cultural heritage remains actively embedded within both communities and represents a valuable foundation for indigenous tourism development. Cultural authenticity is widely recognised as a key component of indigenous tourism, particularly where tourism experiences are rooted in local traditions, community identity, and lived cultural practices (Carr et al., 2021). By integrating this ancestral wisdom, local stakeholders can create distinctive marine ecotourism experiences that foster a sustainable relationship with their spiritual and natural environment (Prasetyo et al., 2021).

Respondents from Mabul consistently recorded higher mean scores across most indicators, suggesting stronger retention and familiarity with traditional cultural knowledge compared to Larapan. This was particularly evident in traditional food knowledge, craft heritage, and performing arts. The stronger cultural knowledge observed in Mabul may indicate more active intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge and stronger continuity of traditional practices. In contrast, Larapan demonstrated comparatively lower knowledge in selected dimensions, although awareness remained generally high across most cultural elements. This discrepancy highlights the necessity of localized cultural revitalization strategies that leverage the strengths of each community to prevent the erosion of traditional practices, especially among the younger generation (Arzaman et al., 2022).

The findings also highlight several cultural assets with clear tourism development potential. Traditional Bajau food such as Sagol, Kilau, and Penjaram may serve as culinary tourism attractions, while traditional crafts such as pandan weaving, miniature boat carvings, and Lepa-Lepa replicas offer opportunities for heritage-based tourism experiences. Similarly, cultural performances such as the Igal-Igal and Daling-Daling dances, alongside ceremonial traditions and traditional attire, provide strong potential for experiential cultural tourism products (Pinere et al., 2022; Sahara et al., 2026). These findings support previous studies suggesting that indigenous cultural heritage can function as a strategic tourism asset when authenticity and community identity are preserved (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Overall, the study confirms that indigenous cultural knowledge among the Bajau community represents a significant resource for tourism diversification in Sabah. The findings suggest that culturally grounded tourism initiatives may provide opportunities to strengthen indigenous visibility, preserve cultural heritage, and expand tourism offerings beyond conventional marine-based tourism. Moreover, by formalizing the documentation of these practices, communities can better leverage their traditional ecological insights as Cultural Keystone Indicator Species, providing visitors with deeper educational experiences regarding local environmental stewardship (Adam et al., 2022).

4.2 Community Participation and Readiness for Indigenous Tourism Development

Community participation and readiness are fundamental determinants of successful indigenous tourism development, as tourism initiatives that lack local involvement often fail to deliver sustainable and equitable outcomes. The findings suggest that the Bajau communities in Mabul and Larapan demonstrate a level of readiness to engage in tourism development, indicating potential for greater community participation in indigenous tourism initiatives. This is particularly important, as indigenous tourism should be community-driven rather than externally imposed, ensuring that local communities retain agency over how their cultural heritage is presented and managed. Moreover, embedding local pride in community identity into the governance of these tourism ventures ensures that residents remain the primary beneficiaries of development while safeguarding against the erosion of traditional values (Yiamjanya et al., 2022).

The presence of strong indigenous cultural knowledge, as identified in this study, also reflects an important indicator of community readiness, as cultural familiarity enhances confidence and capacity to participate in tourism-related activities. Indigenous communities with strong cultural identity are generally better positioned to engage in tourism experiences that involve storytelling, cultural interpretation, traditional performances, handicrafts, and heritage-based interactions with visitors (RAJA et al., 2022, p. 1510; Sailesh & Reddy, 2024; Scheyvens et al., 2021). However, readiness should not be interpreted solely in terms of cultural capacity, as effective tourism participation also requires institutional support, skills development, and inclusive planning mechanisms. Indeed, addressing these infrastructural and educational barriers is essential to transition from cultural potential to operational efficacy, particularly as external agencies and local stakeholders navigate the complex power dynamics inherent in community-based tourism (Zolkefepeli et al., 2025).

Differences between Mabul and Larapan may also suggest varying levels of preparedness, likely influenced by differences in socio-economic conditions, tourism exposure, and access to development opportunities. Communities experiencing lower economic stability may perceive tourism as an attractive livelihood diversification strategy, yet practical participation may remain constrained without adequate support structures (Giampiccoli, 2020; Liu et al., 2012; Setiawan et al., 2017). Therefore, achieving sustainable indigenous tourism development requires not only cultural readiness but also targeted interventions that strengthen local capacity, participation mechanisms, and decision-making inclusion. Such initiatives must prioritize real informed consent and the deep-reaching communication necessary to ensure that collective well-being and communal decision-making remain at the core of project planning (Warnholtz et al., 2020).

These findings support the second objective of the study by highlighting that community participation and readiness represent essential components in determining the feasibility of indigenous tourism development among the Bajau community. To ensure these initiatives avoid cultural homogenization, destination managers must collaborate with local storytellers and leaders to co-create interpretive content that balances authenticity with accessibility (Rise, 2025).

4.3 Perceived Socio-Economic Potential of Indigenous Tourism Development

The findings suggest that indigenous tourism presents meaningful socio-economic development potential for the Bajau communities in Mabul and Larapan. Indigenous tourism offers opportunities not only for income generation but also for livelihood diversification, particularly in rural island communities that often face economic vulnerability and limited employment alternatives. Given the strong cultural assets identified in this study, including traditional food, crafts, performing arts, and ceremonial customs, indigenous tourism could serve as a strategic mechanism for transforming local cultural heritage into sustainable economic opportunities. However, the industry must be carefully managed to prevent the misrepresentation of heritage and the potential marginalization of community members from their own ancestral territories (BAH SIMPONG et al., 2022).

For communities such as the Bajau, whose livelihoods have traditionally been linked to marine resources and informal economic activities, tourism development may provide an alternative pathway for community empowerment and local economic participation (Praptiwi et al., 2021; Rahman & Baddam, 2021). Cultural tourism products such as traditional culinary experiences, handicraft production, cultural performances, and heritage-based storytelling may create direct economic benefits while preserving cultural authenticity. This aligns with broader perspectives that indigenous tourism can contribute to inclusive development when communities actively participate as cultural custodians and economic beneficiaries rather than passive observers (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

However, the socio-economic benefits of indigenous tourism are not automatically guaranteed. Without proper planning, equitable participation, and community-led governance, tourism development may risk external dependency or cultural commodification (Biradar, 2024; Sailesh & Reddy, 2023). Therefore, indigenous tourism development in Mabul and Larapan should be approached through sustainable and community-based frameworks that prioritise local ownership, fair benefit distribution, and long-term resilience. Furthermore, the integration of traditional ecological knowledge must be balanced against the potential for over-reliance on tourism, particularly as communities reliant on hospitality and guiding services often exhibit higher vulnerability to market fluctuations (Nor, 2025).

These findings support the third objective of the study by demonstrating that indigenous tourism is perceived as a viable development pathway capable of contributing to socio-economic improvement while reinforcing cultural sustainability within the Bajau community. Furthermore, encouraging local entrepreneurship can empower residents to

proactively manage their resources, ensuring that tourism ventures align with their own socio-economic aspirations and long-term cultural preservation (Chan et al., 2016). Building on this, stakeholders should facilitate formal training and funding initiatives that explicitly incorporate the Bajau's traditional seafaring expertise into modern service frameworks, thereby mitigating the challenges associated with transitioning from subsistence-based livelihoods to service-oriented roles (Lepoša, 2020; Lim et al., 2021).

5. Conclusions

This study examined indigenous cultural knowledge as a foundation for indigenous tourism development among the Bajau community in Mabul and Larapan Islands, Sabah. The findings reveal that both communities possess substantial cultural knowledge across multiple heritage dimensions, including traditional food, crafts, performing arts, festivals, traditional attire, and ceremonial customs. These cultural elements reflect the richness of Bajau indigenous heritage and demonstrate their potential as valuable resources for tourism development.

The comparative findings indicate that respondents from Mabul generally exhibited stronger levels of cultural knowledge across most indicators compared to those from Larapan, suggesting variations in cultural retention and knowledge transmission between the two island communities. Nevertheless, both communities demonstrated significant awareness of key cultural practices, indicating that indigenous cultural identity remains relatively well preserved despite broader tourism development in the surrounding region.

The study highlights that indigenous cultural heritage can play an important role in diversifying Sabah's tourism offerings beyond conventional marine and resort-based tourism. Cultural experiences centred on traditional culinary heritage, handicrafts, dance performances, festivals, and ceremonial customs may provide opportunities to develop more authentic and community-oriented tourism products. Such approaches could enhance the visibility of indigenous communities while contributing to cultural preservation and destination differentiation.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes empirical insights into the relationship between indigenous cultural knowledge and tourism development within island-based indigenous communities in East Malaysia, an area that remains relatively underexplored in tourism research. Practically, the findings offer useful considerations for tourism stakeholders, policymakers, and local development planners in identifying culturally grounded tourism opportunities that align with community identity and heritage preservation.

Overall, indigenous cultural heritage knowledge should be recognised not merely as a cultural legacy, but as a strategic foundation for developing sustainable and authentic indigenous tourism experiences that support long-term cultural continuity and inclusive tourism development. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations, including the relatively small sample size ($n = 30$) and its focus on only two island communities, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to the broader Bajau population in Sabah. Additionally, the study focused specifically on cultural heritage knowledge and did not directly examine other dimensions such as community readiness, stakeholder engagement, or economic feasibility. Future research is recommended to adopt a mixed-methods approach with a larger and more diverse sample across multiple indigenous communities in Sabah to provide a more comprehensive understanding of indigenous tourism development potential. Qualitative inquiry may also offer deeper insights into community perspectives, cultural transmission processes, and practical tourism development opportunities.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study as the research involved minimal risk and consisted of voluntary participation through questionnaire-based data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to their participation.

CRedit Author Statement

Mohamad Pirdaus Yusoh: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition, formal analysis, writing original draft preparation, writing review and editing.

Normah Abdul Latip: Methodology, validation, supervision, writing review and editing.
Haziqah Nursyahirah Joshep: Investigation, data curation, formal analysis, visualization and editing.
Muhammad Fuad Abdullah: Writing original draft preparation, writing review and editing, validation.
 All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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