

# Empowering *Orang Asli* Women in Tourism Industry: A Case Study in Lenggong Valley, Perak, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** Women, particularly those of the *Orang Asli* community, without a doubt play an important role in the family. These duties and roles include organising household affairs, giving birth and raising children, tending to the house, preparing meals for the family and sorting out their children's school affairs. However, their roles are not limited to duties or daily routines that are done only at home. In fact, women (especially *Orang Asli* women), are capable of far more activities that can empower them, especially in the Lenggong's tourism industry. The empowerment of *Orang Asli* women can be seen from the aspect of skills that they already have which can be turned into tourism products, as well as to increase their source of income in supplementing their family expenses. Among the skills that can be highlighted are making handicrafts, being tourist guides, promoting traditional cuisine and dances as well as finding and brewing wild plant roots for medicinal purposes. The women of the *Orang Asli* who originally only served as housewives, can now change their family's way of life by doing all sorts of activities which can generate new sources of income, by venturing into activities that can be used as attractions and new tourism product markets, especially in Lenggong.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The *Orang Asli* are known as a society that depends on the forest and the surrounding rural environment by carrying out economic subsistence activities such as nomadic farming, hunting and gathering forest produce, as well as fishing (Ramle Abdullah, 2001). Usually, *Orang Asli* women are full time housewives and the daily activities that are done by them are more focused on managing household affairs. Apart from that, they also engage in farming activities such as planting hill paddies (*Oryza*), planting vegetables and herbs, cassava (*manihot utilissima*), sweet potatoes (*ipomea batatas*) as well as other food crops planted for the family. However, apart from that, it cannot be denied that they possess their own unique skills that can be highlighted as tourist attractions in the tourism industry. *Orang Asli* women can also contributed to the tourism sector in Lenggong if they are prepared and intelligently utilise their apparent skills as well as seek out these opportunities for increasing their standard of life. Although the role of women is seen as being limited to the domestic sphere, they conversely have many sorts of skills that are done within everyday life. However, *Orang Asli* women remain unaware that

these skills can help them in their efforts to empower themselves, by themselves. If before only the men were seen as having a role in acquiring a source of income, now *Orang Asli* women too can do the same.

According to (Novel et al., 2012), the very concept of empowerment is to bring forth the potential of man by increasing the awareness of rural communities about self-awareness itself, and consequently enabling them to see their own existence in a social context. Empowerment also involves the result of rural communities in capability-building efforts for either individual or group development. In this matter, the empowerment of *Orang Asli* women is not just possible through cultural heritage itself, but also the skills that are already available, which can be made into important assets in tourism products in Lenggong. It also comprises a process where *Orang Asli* women are able to use their skills, abilities and capabilities in order to prove that they too can strive for self-determination and with their own efforts.

## 2 TOURISM PRODUCTS BASED ON ANCESTRAL SKILLS

*Orang Asli* women are full time housewives who perform daily routines involving child-rearing, cooking, house cleaning, washing clothes and gathering forest produce. It is a given within *Orang Asli* society that the men are responsible for being the breadwinners in order to sustain the family's daily existence. The responsibilities handed to the women on the other hand, are limited to the home and as a result, they do not do any other work outside their village area. However, *Orang Asli* women have various skills that can be ventured into and made into attractive tourism products in the Lenggong tourism industry.

The production of handicrafts comprises a skill that has been passed down through the generations. Handicrafts that are produced by *Orang Asli* society possess an aesthetic value all on their own, and they are also obviously known for creating handicrafts that are unique. *Orang Asli* society are skilled in using materials that they find in their environment in creating handicrafts that are used in their daily lives. These daily-use items which are produced can indirectly become handicrafts that can be sold to interested tourists. *Orang Asli* women are mostly more skilled in the creation of handicrafts that require weaving techniques, such as baskets and mats that are made from *mengkuang* leaves and rattan. The process of handicraft production, from aspects of material and techniques used not only gives exposure to tourists, but also allows the women to promote the handicrafts that have been produced as a source of income. Apart from promoting the uniqueness of these high-quality goods, *Orang Asli* women who are skilled in the creation of handicrafts can indirectly preserve their ancestral cultural heritage.

The *Sewang* dance is a tradition that is quite synonymous with the cultural heritage of the *Orang Asli*, danced since time immemorial by their ancestors. *Orang Asli* society and their *sewang* dance are inseparable, because it ties together all the events that happen in their daily lives. The *sewang* dance is performed for various important events, such as deaths, wedding celebrations, celebrating the New Year, celebrating the harvest season, entertaining tourists and many other occasions. *Orang Asli* women serve an important role in the *sewang* dance because all of the musicians within the dance comprise women only. Through the *sewang* dance as well, *Orang Asli* women can not only present their culture, but also promote their dance while welcoming tourists that come to the village, because the dance is already a compulsory

event anticipated by the tourists when they enter the tourism programs that are available. Apart from that, *Orang Asli* women also gain the opportunity to display their skill in playing traditional musical instruments that are made from bamboo, which are used to produce attractive rhythms during the *sewang* dance. Tourists not only have the opportunity to join the dance, but also get to learn the technique behind playing these traditional musical instruments played by the women. Apart from preserving cultural heritage, *Orang Asli* women can also promote the *sewang* dance in tourism packages in Lenggong.

One of the roles that women have in a family is cooking and food preparation. Cooking techniques that are used by the *Orang Asli* are different from other ethnicities because they still used traditional methods that utilise a wood stove. Cooking techniques can be utilised by *Orang Asli* women to demonstrate and introduce the uniqueness of cooking food in bamboo. Apart from that, it also attracts the interest of tourists to try for themselves the deliciousness and authenticity of traditional *Orang Asli* cooking, which uses fresh ingredients that are gathered from the surrounding environment within their village. Traditional *Orang Asli* cooking can also be served to tourists as a tourism product that is authentic. The preservation of cultural heritage can help the *Orang Asli* women empower their traditional knowledge with regards to food preparation. As a result, it can attract the interest of tourists that wish to know about traditional *Orang Asli* cooking as well as enabling them to learn these cooking techniques.

The women can also sell forest produce, such as tree roots and herbs to the tourists at a reasonable rate, as well as promoting traditional medicine that is practiced by the *Orang Asli*. There are various kinds of herbs that are used by the *Orang Asli* that have many benefits and uses in treating diseases and even preserving well-being, which may not be known by most people. The authenticity, nutrition and efficacy of these herbs can be shared with the tourists through secrets, adages as well as practices that are practiced by the *Orang Asli* women. Apart from that, this sharing can also be presented to foreign tourists through folktales, experiences and cultural knowledge that they possess. Indirectly, *Orang Asli* women can acquire a source of income from the sale of herbal products to tourists. The added income acquired can help their husbands to support their families, especially with basic necessities.

Apart from that, using the skills that they already have, *Orang Asli* women must also be bold enough to try and venture into an occupation in order to break with tradition in their efforts in empowering themselves, such as becoming tour guides, which is

a job usually done by men. It cannot be denied that *Orang Asli* society is well known for their knowledge about the ins and outs of the forest, because they have in fact lived in Lenggong since time immemorial. As a result using these skills, the women can also be tour guides by giving exposure in the identification of herbs in the forest that are mostly used in the traditional medicine of the *Orang Asli* to the tourists that come over to their villages. This exposure to their experience and deep knowledge about tree roots and herbs that are used to cure all sorts of diseases can be turned into a tourist attraction in Lenggong.

## 2.1 The Effort to Empower *Orang Asli* Women

Various efforts have been done to help empower *Orang Asli* women in the tourism industry in Lenggong as well as increasing their potential, especially in the field of entrepreneurship, such as the creation of handicrafts. One of them is to create a special place in each village to ease the gathering of the women folk to produce handicrafts. This special place can also help them acquire formal training to learn more skills as well as techniques in handicraft making, supported by a skilled educational workforce. *Orang Asli* women who are skilled gain the opportunity to present their talents so that they can be highlighted. The *Orang Asli* Development Agency (*Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, JAKOA*) was recommended to provide more courses on handicraft making where the educators would be found amongst the skilled of the *Orang Asli*. Apart from that, a special place ought to be created that can be used as a centre for handicraft material gathering, so that all products that are created can be gathered there as well. With this gathering centre, buyers from outside can purchase these handicrafts created by the *Orang Asli* women more conveniently. Apart from that, tourists can also get to see the creative process behind the creation of the handicrafts, especially in terms of their type, materials as well as technique, in order to create a product that is beautiful and high in quality.

The *Orang Asli* Development Agency, with the cooperation of various other agencies also plays an important role in connecting the inhabitants, especially the *Orang Asli* women of Lenggong, with resources that can help them venture into the handicraft making business. Basic exposure to business knowledge is extremely important, in order for them to utilize their knowledge so that they may better their socioeconomic condition. The women of the *Orang Asli* society must be bolder, be highly motivated, be creative and curious, as well as

possess information of and be prepared for all sorts of challenges in their efforts to become successful entrepreneurs. Apart from that, in order to ensure handicraft products made by *Orang Asli* women can be commercialised, specific training and handicraft promotion must be done so that their cultural heritage does not go extinct or forgotten, and goes on to become the highlight of the general public. Indirectly, it opens up new employment opportunities to *Orang Asli* women, and consequently improves their standard of living in terms of sources of income through the sale of handicrafts. Although traditional handicrafts do not bring forth huge profits, if they are promoted and managed commercially, they can at the very least bring some reasonable measure of profit.

Their expertise in preparing the ingredients for traditional medicines can empower *Orang Asli* women in the field of alternative medicine. Authorities and agencies that are involved in this field, including the Malaysian Forest Research Institute (*Institut Penyelidikan Perhutanan Malaysia, FRIM*) can help in initiating research as well as analysis on the herbs used in traditional *Orang Asli* herbs using advanced modern technology, in order to ensure the efficacy of the medicines. The efficacy of the medicines is extremely important in order to ensure that the said products can be commercialised in the alternative medicine market. The research is also an effort to empower *Orang Asli* women by using their own expertise in gathering herbs which are very beneficial in the treatment of certain diseases. Their expertise in terms of identifying the types of plants, their measurements and the techniques possessed by the *Orang Asli* women can be used in the commercialisation of traditional medicine products, using medicinal roots as well as herbs that can be gathered from the forest.

Efforts done with the help of the *Orang Asli* Development Agency and the Malaysian Forest Research Institute can open employment opportunities to *Orang Asli* women in the field of entrepreneurship. With the existence of these employment opportunities, *Orang Asli* women can acquire a source of income from the sale of medicinal herbs in the market. As an initial step, they can do collecting activities, gathering and separation of medicinal herbs in small packets according to weight or portions, and then sell them to tourists. Apart from sharing the benefits of their medicinal knowledge with them, *Orang Asli* women can also promote traditional medicine as a product and a new attraction in the tourism sector in Lenggong. The relevant authorities can help promote *Orang Asli* products in terms of development as well

as increasing the abilities of products based on traditional medicines.

Apart from that, other agencies that can help in the effort to empower *Orang Asli* women include the Federal Agricultural Marketing Board (*Lembaga Pemasaran Pertanian, FAMA*) and the Malaysian Agriculture Research and Development Institute (*Institut Penyelidikan Dan Kemajuan Pertanian Malaysia, MARDI*). Hill paddy (*Oryza sativa*) that is farmed by *Orang Asli* women can be commercialised with the help of FAMA, MARDI as well as JAKOA. Research that is carried out by MARDI can increase the quality of hill paddy in terms of proper system usage. Exposure to farming techniques as well as pest management can help the *Orang Asli* acquire knowledge about the systems of paddy hill farming as well as promoting the products of their own farming efforts. Following that, FAMA can then play an active role in the marketing activities of the agricultural produce of the *Orang Asli* women. With the help of various agencies, FAMA can also help widen and develop new markets for the planting of paddy in Lenggong. Apart from that, tourists also have the opportunity to see the process of planting hill paddy, planted by the women of the *Orang Asli* when they visit the villages of the *Orang Asli* in Lenggong.

Other products that can be promoted in the tourism industry are forms of cultural heritage such as the *sewang* dance. Cooperation with the *Orang Asli* Development Agency (JAKOA) as well as tourism organisations and cultural organisations of Perak especially can promote the *sewang* dance to tourists by sponsoring various programs as well as activities that can empower *Orang Asli* women. Exposure about the dance can be done through programs such as *sewang* dance competitions amongst the villages, right up to the state level and even the national level. With the existence of such programs, *Orang Asli* peoples, particularly the women are able to present the *sewang* dance, which represents a part of the cultural heritage to society at large as well as making the dance a tourist attraction.

Traditional *Orang Asli's* cooking can also be promoted to tourists. With the existence of programs sponsored by the relevant authorities and agencies, tourists gain the opportunity to enjoy traditional cuisine that's been prepared by the womenfolk of the *Orang Asli* community. Tourists will not only get to enjoy delicious food, but also learn the technique of cooking food within bamboo. Every time there is a program, such as an event or an important ceremony in their village, *Orang Asli* women get to display their talents and mastery of cooking as well as prepare food traditionally. Apart from fronting their talents, they also preserve their cultural heritage that they still practice to this day. In

order to enjoy the experience of having such traditional cuisine prepared by the womenfolk of the *Orang Asli*, tourists must visit their village in Lenggong to see for themselves the skills of the *Orang Asli* women, especially in food preparation. The attraction will help the women of the *Orang Asli* village become better known by the tourists, with the existence of these interesting skills.

## 2.2 Incentives to Increase Awareness

Efforts to empower *Orang Asli* women, done by various agencies and authorities, can help raise awareness to them about means and methods that can be acquired with particular regards to the tourism industry in Lenggong. According to (Brereton et al., 2007), the *Orang Asli's* must be made aware of the advantages that they can acquire from tourism development in terms of monetary rewards and the support provided. Using only their main assets such as the uniqueness of their culture and their present skills, *Orang Asli* women can acquire a source of income that can increase their quality of life. The relationship between the preservation of culture and economics are interdependent, where culture is seen as being able to contribute to economic success, while economic success in return contributes to the preservation of culture (Hinch & Butler, 2007).

Apart from that, efforts to empower *Orang Asli* women will not succeed if they do not possess a positive attitude towards venturing into the tourism industry in Lenggong. If the attitude of the community indicates an inclination towards supporting such efforts, the returns (whether the rewards are monetary or not) that can be attained are higher compared to the development that is initiated in an area where the local community possess an attitude that is not supportive towards such development (Aref, 2010). This is because the local community is the most important player here, and is a 'stakeholder' involved directly in the process of tourism development in their area (Byrd et al, 2009).

Encouragement and support from various agencies not only can give awareness to *Orang Asli* women, it can also increase the level of motivation that they have to venture into entrepreneurship. This is because *Orang Asli* society is more inclined towards an activity if it can give them benefits and returns that are reasonable to them. According to Hinch and Butler (2007) in Rohayu and Noor Sharipah, *Orang Asli* are motivated in involving themselves in tourism, mainly due to economic concerns, because the industry can help them produce an income for the community. In fact, tourism can also open new opportunities through its involvement in the management and control of

important socioeconomic activities, empowering the aboriginal peoples, as well as training them to acquire incomes and economic advantages that are formed from it (Goodwin, 2007).

In the effort to empower *Orang Asli* women in the tourism industry at Lenggong, continuous encouragement and support is very much required. The most important thing is to ensure that they have a positive attitude, as well as motivation to empower themselves with the advantages that they already have. Many communities in developing countries possess the requirements for self-sufficiency using the resources that they have in their own communities (Kalsom, Nor Ashikin & Mohamad Amin, 2004). *Orang Asli* women in Lenggong must be given exposure about the success of other ethnic groups in this country, and use them as examples that can be followed in order to increase their own capabilities. Apart from that, the empowerment of *Orang asli* women can help remove the assumptions and negative perceptions about the *Orang Asli* community, that they are a lazy group of people that are unproductive. This situation is associated with personal attributes that are one of the reasons associated with the regression of the *Orang asli* (Khairul Hisyam & Ibrahim, 2007; Mustaffa, 2008; Ramlee, 2008; JAKOA, 2011). In order to realise the efforts of this empowerment, negative labels such as timidness, self-deprecation, over-reliance on government aid and unproductive can be changed with the involvement of the women of the *Orang Asli* in the tourism sector of Lenggong.

### 3 CONCLUSION

The empowerment of the *Orang Asli* women is capable of increasing their potential through their cultural heritage as well as their traditional skills. The preservation of authentic culture and skills which have been handed down through the generations to the womenfolk of the *Orang Asli* have the potential to become tourism products that can attract the interest of domestic tourists as well as international ones, to venture in and take a closer look at their lives. The existence of efforts, encouragement as well as support from various agencies can help *Orang Asli* women highlight their talents in order to become more productive, as well as venturing themselves into the tourism industry in Lenggong. Apart from changing the perception that *Orang Asli* women are only ever house wives that merely organise household affairs, now they can also contribute to the economic well-being of their family.

Empowerment also gives exposure to the womenfolk of the *Orang Asli* community about the control over their lives, whether they are more independent or are more reliant on relevant authorities. Tourism products are also an opportunity to empower *Orang Asli* women, especially in the tourism sector in Lenggong, so that they can become more self-reliant, competitive as well as be able to generate their own income in increasing their living standards.

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