The perspective of indigenous culture - A case study of the Truku tribe in East Taiwan

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Abstract

In the area of cultural recovery and ethnic identity, the Truku tribe is still in a situation of criticism and reflection. Researchers have studied the rituals and religion of the Truku tribe, and their relationship with the domain of ancestral spirits. They have looked for possible ways of integrating rituals, religion, and theology. The purpose of this study is to explore how the Truku tribe in East Taiwan has preserved its customs over the years, and what prospects are for the future. We use qualitative research method, including archival research, observation, and SWOT analysis. We conclude that the Truku tribe is an effective example of the development of tribal culture and the Seejoq language. The best way to ensure the greatest advantage and opportunities for tribal culture is to give the initiative to the local officials. The visibility and validity of the unique rituals and religion or the Trukus can be raised by the peoples participation. Their focus should be on a spirit of generosity and giving, and demonstrating their ancestral culture, so that they may understand the world of the spirit. By these means, the business viability of the tribe and the development of the camp may also be enhanced. The tribe should return to its roots and avoid political influences.

Keywords: Tribe, Tourism, Culture, Festival, Ritual

Received: 22 December 2016 / Accepted: 06 January 2017 / Published: 22 February 2017

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the indigenous people are aware of the rising interest in tribal culture, they hope through the large-scale cultural activities to highlight the existence of the tribe, and to reproduce the traditional ethical culture, customs and life style (Yamaji 1987; Sayama 1983). They educate younger generations to follow the footsteps of the ancestors by transmission of ritual, so that the outside world will understand the spirit and essence of tribal culture through the experience and seeing with their own eyes. From 1991 onwards, the Truku ethnic group attempted to declare the uniqueness of their ethnic culture through ancestral ritual performances and traditional art activities. In order to strengthen the Truku ethnic identity, ethnic independence and individual social personality drive, they construct and perform ancestral rituals, and have added the history of ethnic groups, national management policies and accumulated expression of internal emotions in real life. They also encourage the presence of the audience and make them receive some kind of inspiration or excitement, in the course of public performance, beyond the limitations of social culture and historical time (Cihung 2011; Nasser 2017). The purpose of this study is to explore how the Truku tribe in East Taiwan has preserved its customs over the years, and what prospects are for the future. This is especially significant for contemporary artists and musicians who are seeking authentic historic local styles. It is significant for linguists interested in the history and development of languages. It is significant in political arena in terms of ethnic and socio-political identity and self-respect. It is significant in studies of comparative religions that seek underlying common themes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1993, United Nations had designated “the International Aboriginal Year”, and announced the holding of “The World Indigenous International Cooperation Program for the First Decade”. The world started touristic...
activities to explore mysterious remote and strange customs of the aboriginal areas (Ji 1998; Weng and Yang 2016). Chen (2004) indicated that indigenous tourism is using the cultural resources of the indigenous people to develop the tourism activities, including indigenous handicrafts, clothing, architecture, music, dance and cultural traditions. Indigenous tourism is when the tribes use their own surrounding ecological environment and national culture as a tourist resource.

Through the marketing strategy of the tribal culture tour, tourists observe and understand Aboriginal cultural traits, by attending the cultural relics, dance performances, life experience, with guided tours (Zhang 2004). So, for the sustainability of indigenous tourism, it should be combined with a wide range of tribal ceremonies, culture, art, architecture, festivals, monuments and natural beauty of the indigenous region by tourism planning, and marketing (Liu 2012). In the past ten years, the indigenous festival (in general called Annual Worship Festival) has been organized by the government successfully, and the indigenous culture has been transformed from visiting natural landscape to the deep exploration of local culture. At the same time, it is not desirable to think of the Truku tribe as a marketable commodity, to be preserved self-consciously as an attraction for the tourist industry.

Different ethnic groups have many types of rituals, and different rituals of the communities themselves also have different meanings. The annual rituals are rich in the cultural connotations of faith, social organization, traditional life and taboos of each ethnic group. To Truku, the implementation of various traditional rituals is the practice of faith in the ancestral spirit. This includes the life beliefs of the Truku, such as sowing, harvesting, hunting, ancestral worship, head hunting, rain free prayer, prayer, medical service, and so on (Cihung 2011).

Different ethnic groups due to the different customs and lifestyles, have their own different styles of festivals and legends. Taiwan indigenous people have all kinds of local rich traditional ritual, a unique oral pathway from generation to generation, in which the ancestors of life and wisdom are portrayed in the ceremony (Council of Indigenous People 2011).

The Truku ethnic group believed in the relationship of guardianship between the human and ancestral spirits. In order to maintain the traditional order of life, crops harvests and to maintain the animal species for hunting, ritual activities are important events in the life of the tribe. The purpose of the rites is to pray for the ancestral spirits to guard the land for the sake of farming and hunting. Truku has always maintained the same family-centered tribal groups, to consolidate the traditional community of social ancestors.

The Truku tribe had an impact on traditional cultural values during the Japanese colonial and Chinese government rule. It played its part during the destruction of the Gaya as the core of faith and the abolition of cultural practices (Hualien County Shiuin Township 2016). In the resultant disorder of culture, it was found that the Mgay Bari ritual embodies the central idea of the ancestors of the Truku. This is through the sowing, hunting, and harvest rituals that show continuity with the manifestations of traditional life, so that generations can keep the lessons of ancestors in mind.

As for the understanding of traditional culture and the connotation of ritual names and rituals, there are many differences. The “ancestral spiritual ritual” is used as the official name of the festival. It is called “Mgay Bari”. The significance of the ritual is the ancestral spirits give blessing to the harvest and significance to thanksgiving. After many years of promotion and reform, Hualien County Xiulin Township Office, in addition to the traditional process of sacrificial rites, also displays exhibits of the past life of tribe weaving, ramming glutinous rice, making bamboo rice, hunting knives, bows and arrows, rattan and other handicrafts. In 2005, the festival was extended to include national dance competitions, industrial exhibitions, craft exhibitions and traditional archery competitions. In 2015, they held the “Truku Literature and History Book Fair”, which displayed the record of traditional skills of the Truku, cultural history, music and dance and other related books. Mgay Bari Thanksgiving of Truku also extends to other tribes. Tribes celebrate in accordance with their tribal environment, and developed the various festival activities of tribal type.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research intended to explore the annual ritual activities of Mgay Bari in Shiuin town in Hualien County, East Taiwan. We studied tribal people who participate in this activity, their spirit and tendencies of integration into the ethnic activities. We used qualitative research method, including archival analysis and obser-
vation. We also applied SWOT analysing data. We hope to find a suitable marketing strategy for the future, to create greater economic benefits of cultural tourism. We analyzed the advantages, disadvantages, and limitations of the culture development of Truku.

**DISCUSSION**

Since Truku was successfully recognized officially in 2004, the government begins more actively to collect their own materials of ethnic culture, the recollections of the elderly, the elites’ knowledge, and long-term investment in cultural workers to explore historical and cultural materials. They look for the ethnic origins in the limited information and the unique memory of the elderly. Mgay Bari in its long-term complex structure has gradually condensed the tribe’s rich and diverse content every year. With the formation of Taiwan’s unique aboriginal sightseeing style and assets, it is hoped that Mgay Bari has united the tribal efforts to develop Taiwan’s aboriginal potential for tourism events.

There is an interdependent relationship between festivals and cultural tourism. The two eventually have to return to the locale for sustainable development. Festivals and cultural tourism have the characteristics of diverse development. If it is a single industry, it is easy to deduce certain categories of features, and ignore the cultural uniqueness, inheritance and value.

The expansion of the concept of culture is not limited to architecture or ritual itself, but also to peripheral derivatives. It is not just the transfer over generations, also the accompaniment of other "products" that have been developed (Prentice 1994). It is worthwhile to explore the traditional creations in terms of intentionality and un-intentionality, when considering these new and old traditions in a more deliberate way (Hobsbawm 1983).

Truku people may take advantage of this strong historic identity and cohesion. At the same time, we need to prevent enclosing tribal people in an enclave or enclosure like exhibits for tourists, but to recognize, they also may need and wish to assimilate with the wider non-tribal population. We appreciate that indigenous tourism is only one valuable aspect of Truku life and should not be allowed to eclipse other non-tourist targeted activities. Opportunity should also be taken to develop the non-tourist elements of Truku society.

**SWOT Analysis of Mgay Truku Tribe**

In this study, we defined traditional indigenous tourism, and collected documents of Mgay Bari. Then we reviewed the Strengths (S), Weaknesses (W), Opportunities (O) and Threats (T) of the ritual festival in the development of the tourism industry. By this SWOT analysis report, it is hoped to work out an effective strategy to strengthen the Mgay Bari of Truku rituals, in order to develop more indigenous tourism, as the International Aboriginal Festival activities are unique.

**Strengths (S)**

- To increase the visibility of sacrificial ceremonies due to the increase of manpower / financial / material resources in the public sector.
- With the Truku family’s unique cultural style, inheritance carries forward the deeper symbolic significance.
- Ethnic participation is high, and there is the power of cohesion of ethnic groups. The tribe should make use of these strong points to enhance their political status.

**Weaknesses (W)**

- Official network platform is not set up to record the activities related to save the cultural message.
- Official activities are in the form of management, and not actively towards the development of Aboriginal culture and tourism as the goal of operations.
- The motive of ethnic participation has been reduced to the national movement conference, and the traditional culture has less publicity and exploration.
- For venue change, not ideal.
- Innovative courage is needed
- Needs willingness to actively invest, and to get rid of inferior elements.
Opportunities (O)

- Develop Taiwan’s unique aboriginal sightseeing activities.
- To extend the festival time, with the aboriginal tribal tours, attract tourists.
- Marketing Aboriginal cultural and creative industries.
- Manpower and funding is expected to be able to re-invest in the history of the elegant, so that the culture has the opportunity to be fully preserved.

Threats (T)

- Aboriginal industry has become commoditized.
- Only once a year for the event, presents a one-sided view of the culture.
- Cultural level appears static.
- Cultural workers are too few, especially cultural scholars and music and dance experts.
- Unfavorable venue.

More attention should be paid to the national movement, which should not be seen as a weakness but an ally. How to avoid commodification of Truku culture and industry while at the same time marketing it, is a difficult question, as seen in other minority cultures (e.g. American Indians). It will be the most interesting question for future researchers.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, through examining the relevant literature on the Mgay Bari Truku tribe, we used SWOT analysis, in an attempt to assess the merits and demerits, opportunities and threats of the development of tourism, for the Truku tribe. We find that Mgay Bari of Truku’s rituals can play a strong part, in rebuilding the Truku tribe founded on its rituals and ideology. This emphasizes the importance of going back to one’s natural roots, and returning to seek the significance of the traditional rites (Hualien County Shiulin Township Office 2016).

We found opportunities for development of visits to sites of indigenous civilizations, for exploration of cultural relics, rites, and propose plans for a future marketing strategy to create greater economic benefits from cultural tourism. By repeating the display of ritual dance-drama is possible to convey the deep significance of traditional culture. Despite criticism and challenges from within the village, about the original intention of this initiative, we highlighted the attempt for all ethnic groups to agree about the preservation of their heritage. Remembering the footprints of ancestors left behind, recalling the ancestors’ teachings, indigenous people may protect future generations, who in their lives will practice in accordance with the spirit of the ancestors. This spirit is transferred and deeply rooted by the awareness of ritual. The Mgay Bari of Truku rituals have certainly enough room to play an expanding part within the plans for tourism of indigenous ancestral cultures in Taiwan.

Our unique contribution is that this study explored the tribal culture development since the time of pride in tribal ancestry has replaced former beliefs that indigenous people were inferior. The significance of this study is that it adds some weight to assert equality of opportunity for tribal people, not only as preserved within tribal enclaves, but also within the networks of modern society.

Limitations of this research: We were limited to one indigenous tribe, and the situation may be different for other tribal peoples in Taiwan. Future research should focus on how it is possible to preserve and market tribal rituals and art works without to some degree making them into commodities. The answer to this may lie in the hands of the local artists themselves.

REFERENCES


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