The Implications of a Planned Development on Consumption Practices: a Case Study of an Orang Asli Community in Malaysia

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The aim of this study is to analyze the consumption changes facing a Mah Meri community (Indigenous) in Peninsula Malaysia using a phenomenology design. The alterations from the planned development have impacted and changed the consumption practices of the Mah Meri community.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on one of the Mah Meri’s community, an Orang Asli community (Indigenous) in Peninsula Malaysia. The Orang Asli communities in Malaysia are dispersed in many locations all over Malaysia, and they are non-homogeneous. The Mah Meri community in this case study occupied 36,000 acres of land during their ancestral time (Endicott, 2015). The government intends to upgrade the living quality of the community and in place, implemented a planned development on their land (their land was “exchanged” with a local agent who had altered the land into a plantation estate with the hope to provide employment and increased economic conditions of the community. With the intervention, the community has been relocated to places that are different from their original habitat, of which the community needs to adapt to new conditions and environment.

Though the planned development by the government (to reduce poverty eradication and to create a balanced society) have their own merits and benefits, these initiatives could be controversial for the Mah Meri community, whose spaces and natural environment are intruded. The planned development has modified the Mah Meri way of life and brought forth different consumption practices. The aim of this study is to analyze the consumption changes that the Mah Meri have had to adapt to due to the pressure of planned development—from practices of self-sustenance and minimal market transactions to a higher reliance on market transactions and material consumption.

For the Orang Asli, nature is the foundation of their subsistence and culture (Munoz, Mladenoff, Schroeder, and Williams, 2014); whereas for the contemporary world, the meaning of nature is connected mainly to development plans. During inception, the Mah Meri community believe that the local agent (who are tasked to implement the developments) will increase their welfare and economic conditions. But in reality, the development has created a different scenario to the community. The community is in conditions of the extreme marginal situation, which creates a low power defend for them.

The alterations that have been brought by planned development have impacted and changed the lifestyle of the Mah Meri. Initially, the Mah Meri has insisted that they would utilize their ancestral land, but the government believes that a planned development would provide far-reaching benefits on the community. With the land ownership changed to the local agent, the majority of the community has rejected the work opportunities provided on the plantation. With the rise of the plantation estate and settlement (a small township has been established) and the loss of the natural spaces, the self-sustenance concept dwindles. For most of the Mah Meri who suffered the loss of territories, they have to incorporate new ways of working and living.

This study used a phenomenology design to explore the Mah Meri community. The researchers had collected data from the head of the Mah Meri community and 10 villagers in two different interview sessions that lasted for nine hours. The semi-structured probing questions were: Tell us about the life of an indigenous community (before and after the development); how the developmental changes are impacting the community and how the community is adapting to the changes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving comparing transcripts for similarities and differences, and searching for the major structural relationships that were related. The themes were then interpreted and compared against each other, following the stages recommended by Charmaz and Belgrave (2012)—analysis and initial coding, analysis, and interpretation (focused coding), and lastly, the interpretation of the overarching themes were developed from the focused codes.

The themes that were derived from the analyses were materialistic involvement, losing connection to nature, living sources, taboo beliefs, a daily habit, political system, new subsistence and beliefs and future living. These themes were associated with the altered consumption practices that are mainly focusing on these broadly defined consumption themes: from a necessity consumption (basic, self-sustenance, subsistence, productive); and cultural consumption (self-referential, culture, reality) towards a higher order consumption practices of materialistic consumption (functional, aesthetic, reflective, sensuous); playful consumption (performance, pleasure, entertainment, imaginary); intellectualized consumption (cognitive, signs, experience); trend consumption (fashion, statement, design) and contingency consumption (incidental, emergency).

There is a gradual evolution of consumption practices from self-sustenance consumption to a more materialistic-type consumption practices (Spronk, 2014) with the introduction of the plantation estate and small town. The presupposes consumers, still with minimal purchasing power, have contracted the habit of buying and liking practical, functional products and consumer objects which provide them with some form of consumption statement. This consumption pattern expresses a materialistic aspiration and ambition with the change in the social structure (Warde, 2017). There is also a certain reification of the mentality in the formation of consumption practices and how the boundaries of consumption are further upgraded (Wahlen and Laamanen, 2015)—breaking away from the necessity consumption purposes to a higher order consumption practices. The monetarization of small town life becomes more prevalent. It becomes evident that money quantifies qualitative differences, reduces them to the monotony of more or less and the dialectic between the poor and the rich is more visible and differentiated.

In the case of Mah Meri community, they had tried to blend in their lifestyle by adapting to the new conditions. The government’s development plan has caused a trajectory in the lives of the Mah Meri and their connection to their natural spaces and cosmos. The development has opened a new perspective and dimensions in their daily lives. Achieving higher wealth and competitiveness are certainly worthy pursuits in addressing the economic challenges (Hayes, Caldwell, Licona, and Meyer, 2015). However, the condition set forth by the planned development has changed the lifestyle of the Mah Meri community. The findings showed supports that the community’s views about living had been detached from the original view. The community has changed their consumption patterns from a situation of need and necessity to a relatively more aesthetic habitus practices when there are elements of development (Alba and Williams, 2013; Pilar and Eumontspool, 2015; Ulver and Ostberg (2014).

REFERENCES


