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ULUNG BUAYEH: FROM MYTHOLOGY TO ECOTOURISM

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Abstract

This study explores the potential of the Ulung Buayeh ritual practiced by the Lundayeh community as a foundation for sustainable ecotourism in the interior region of Sabah, particularly in Long Pasia. Using ethnographic methods and structured interviews, the research documents the historical context, socio-cultural values, and aesthetic dimensions of Ulung Buayeh ritual sites. It also examines how this cultural tradition aligns with the core principles of sustainable tourism, namely cultural heritage preservation, community participation, and environmental stewardship. Findings indicate that, when integrated within a community-based tourism (CBT) framework, the Ulung Buayeh ritual site holds significant potential as a unique tourism product that promotes cultural appreciation, supports local livelihoods, and strengthens the empowerment of the Lundayeh community.

Keywords: Ulung Buayeh, Lundayeh, Long Pasia, ecotourism, community-based tourism (CBT)

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage plays a vital role in shaping the identity of a community and serves as a valuable foundation for the development of culture-based tourism. In the context of indigenous communities in Sabah, ethnic groups such as the Lundayeh possess a wealth of traditions that remain well-preserved yet are often underrepresented in mainstream tourism narratives. One of the most distinctive elements of Lundayeh culture is the *Ulung Buayeh* ritual, a traditional ceremony deeply intertwined with the community's belief system, social hierarchy, and relationship with the natural environment.

The *Ulung Buayeh*, or crocodile effigy, holds profound cultural significance for the Lundayeh people of Long Pasia. Historically, these earthen crocodile mounds were constructed to commemorate a warrior's victory in headhunting expeditions. The crocodile symbolized strength, heroism, and the subjugation of enemies. During the *Nui Ulung Buayeh* ceremony, the community gathered to construct the effigy, perform ritual dances, and sing heroic songs (*fekuab*) led by women. The victorious warrior would then strike the effigy with a sword (*felefet*) to proclaim his triumph (Ricky Ganang et al., 2018). With the advent of Christianity in the early 1930s, such practices were deemed incompatible with new religious teachings, and the tradition gradually evolved into a more symbolic form. Today, during special occasions such as weddings, the community prepares *Luba' Buayeh*, rice molded into the shape of a crocodile, to honour their ancestral heritage (Daily Express Sabah; Utusan Borneo). Although the ritual itself has disappeared, the *Ulung Buayeh* sites remain scattered across Long Pasia. According to records from the Sabah State Museum Department (JMNS) and the Borneo Archaeological Research Unit (UPArk), Universiti Malaysia Sabah, there are only 13 identified *Ulung Buayeh* sites in Long Pasia and the nearby area of Long Mio (Baco & Majinus, 2019).

Located in the southern interior of Sabah, Long Pasia is one of the main settlements of the Lundayeh people, where many traditional practices continue to be observed. The area is not only rich in biodiversity and natural beauty but also possesses significant potential for sustainable ecotourism development. In efforts to diversify the state's tourism offerings, an approach that integrates cultural heritage preservation with environmental sustainability has become increasingly relevant.

The present study evaluates the potential of *Ulung Buayeh* as a distinctive and competitive tourism product within a community-based tourism (CBT) framework. It further examines how this cultural heritage can be developed and promoted in a manner that respects its sacred value while contributing to the social and economic empowerment of the Lundayeh community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-based tourism (CBT) has gained increasing attention as a sustainable approach to tourism development, particularly in rural and Indigenous contexts. It emphasizes local ownership, community participation, and the responsible management of natural and cultural resources (Sundar & Govindan, 2016; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). As a development model, CBT empowers communities to actively engage in tourism planning and operations, ensuring that economic benefits remain within the locality while strengthening cultural preservation (Gössling & Telfer, 2009). Within this framework, cultural and mythological heritage often serves as a foundational asset for place-based tourism, offering visitors authentic experiences that reflect community identity and ancestral traditions (George et al., 2009). In the context of cultural tourism, traditional ceremonies and rituals such as *Ulung Buayeh* provide a unique and authentic value-added experience for tourists. These rituals not only introduce tourists to the beliefs and values of the community but also connect them with the environment, which forms the foundation of many indigenous traditions (Cohen, 2004). *Ulung Buayeh* is deeply embedded in Lundayeh oral traditions and mythological narratives. The site is believed to be sacred, associated with ancestral stories of crocodiles as guardians or spiritual beings, and it holds an integral place in the collective memory and cultural identity of the Lundayeh community.

According to Timothy and Boyd (2003), the preservation of cultural heritage can serve as a major attraction in cultural-based tourism, particularly when integrated with environmental conservation. Similarly, McCool and Moisey (2008) emphasize that a key challenge in ecotourism is preventing tourism activities from harming natural habitats or local cultures. Hence, sustainable tourism principles must be applied holistically to balance economic development with the preservation of both natural and cultural resources.

Scholarly work on Lundayeh traditions, such as those by Harrisson (1959) and, more recently, Crain (2000) highlights the spiritual ecology of highland communities in Sabah and Sarawak, where sites like *Ulung Buayeh* function not only as cultural landmarks but also as nodes of environmental stewardship. These beliefs often inspire conservation practices rooted in taboo and ritual, reflecting an indigenous ethic that aligns closely with the principles of ecotourism and community-based tourism (CBT). In parallel, studies on indigenous tourism in Southeast Asia (Cole, 2007; Hitchcock et al., 2009) demonstrate that mythological heritage can serve as a distinctive tourism asset when interpreted ethically and collaboratively. The community of Long Pasia, for instance, has shown growing interest in promoting its heritage through tourism, as reflected in pilot projects and initiatives led by NGOs and local tour operators that integrate cultural narratives into trekking routes and homestay experiences (WWF Malaysia, 2010).

In Sabah, particularly in rural areas such as Long Pasia, there is growing awareness of the potential for ecotourism development. A study by WWF Malaysia (2019) indicates that this region is not only rich in biodiversity but also endowed with diverse cultural traditions that remain underexplored. Bala and Basrah (2010) actively promoted the cultural importance of *Ulung Buayeh* and explored its potential in advancing community-based tourism in Long Pasia. Their research highlights how *Ulung Buayeh* sites, as integral components of Lundayeh heritage, can be leveraged to foster sustainable tourism that benefits local communities while preserving cultural landscapes. Similarly, Ismail et al. (2015) identified rural areas in Sabah such as Long Pasia as promising locations for ecotourism initiatives that engage local participation and emphasize the conservation of both cultural and environmental heritage.

Overall, the literature underscores that community-based tourism and cultural preservation not only create economic opportunities but also enhance intercultural understanding by introducing the unique heritage of Indigenous peoples to the wider world (Sharpley, 2009). Through the CBT framework, the Lundayeh community has transformed *Ulung Buayeh* from a fading warrior ritual into a living symbol of cultural identity and sustainable livelihood allowing heritage to be safeguarded while empowering local communities (Sabah Tourism Board, 2023).

Ulung Buayeh therefore holds substantial potential as a focal point for community-based ecotourism in Long Pasia. It embodies the key pillars of CBT cultural preservation, community empowerment, and environmental stewardship. Realizing this potential, however, requires a culturally grounded and community-led approach supported by institutional collaboration and ethical tourism practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an ethnographic approach, which integrates participant observation, structured interviews with community leaders, and document analysis of historical texts related to the *Ulung Buayeh* ritual. The ethnographic method was selected because it enables a deep understanding of the cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions of the Lundayeh community. Each research technique offers a unique perspective on how *Ulung Buayeh* is perceived and valued within the community, as well as its potential to serve as a sustainable ecotourism attraction. The specific methods employed include:

i. Participant Observation:

Participant observation was conducted at former ritual sites in Long Pasia, where the *Ulung Buayeh* ceremony was historically performed by the Lundayeh community. This method allowed the researcher to document the physical

characteristics of the sites and observe the community's current engagement with these cultural landscapes.

ii. Structured Interviews with Community Leaders:

Structured interviews were carried out with traditional leaders and village elders who possess extensive knowledge of the history, meanings, and values embedded in the *Ulung Buayeh* tradition. These narratives provided valuable insights into the community's perception of the ritual and its contemporary relevance to cultural identity and tourism development.

iii. Document Analysis:

Document analysis involved reviewing historical texts, archival materials, and previous academic works related to the *Ulung Buayeh* ritual. This approach helped contextualize the evolution of the tradition and its transformation within the broader cultural history of the Lundayeh people.

iv. Limitations of the Study

While the ethnographic approach provided rich and in-depth insights into the cultural and spiritual meanings of *Ulung Buayeh*, this study was limited by the small number of key informants and its reliance on oral narratives that may be affected by memory bias. Accessibility to remote sites and seasonal conditions also posed logistical challenges during fieldwork. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as contextually grounded rather than broadly generalizable, reflecting the lived experiences and perspectives of the Lundayeh community in Long Pasia.

v. Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Research Ethics Guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews and observations. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the respectful representation of their cultural knowledge in line with community norms and ethical research standards.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the key findings of the study, focusing on the transformation of *Ulung Buayeh* from a sacred ritual monument to a cornerstone of contemporary community-based tourism (CBT) in Long Pasia. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews with local elders and community leaders, the discussion highlights how *Ulung Buayeh* functions as both a cultural memory site and a potential model for sustainable ecotourism.

The findings are organised thematically to reflect the multidimensional significance of *Ulung Buayeh*: as a mythological and spiritual symbol, as an ecological and educational space, and as a foundation for community-driven tourism initiatives. These themes not only capture the cultural and spiritual meanings embedded in *Ulung Buayeh* but also reveal the challenges of preserving Indigenous heritage amid modernisation, migration, and changing belief systems.

By integrating these cultural insights with principles of sustainable tourism, this section discusses how the Lundayeh community is actively reinterpreting ancestral traditions to align with conservation goals and socio-economic development. Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that *Ulung Buayeh* is more than a historical relic; it is a living heritage that bridges mythology, identity, and modern community resilience in the context of ecotourism.

Ulung Buayeh and Its Significance to the Lundayeh

Ulung Buayeh, or the “crocodile mound,” derives from the Lundayeh words *ulung* (structure or monument) and *buayeh* (crocodile). Traditionally, this monument was erected at the centre of the village to commemorate a warrior’s victorious return from a headhunting (*Ngayau*) expedition. Shaped like a crocodile, the effigy symbolizes strength, endurance, and courage, which are the core virtues of the Lundayeh warrior ethos. Beyond its symbolic representation, the crocodile was revered as a mystical creature intimately linked to the spirit world. As part of the ritual, the returning warrior would strike the effigy with a traditional sword (*felefet*), symbolizing his triumph over enemies. The ceremony was accompanied by war chants, traditional dances, and communal feasting rituals that celebrated the warrior’s achievement while reinforcing social unity and ethnic identity within the community.

Beyond its commemorative role, *Ulung Buayeh* holds profound spiritual significance, believed to be the dwelling place of a guardian spirit manifested in crocodile form. This entity embodies protective natural forces and ancestral heritage, making the mound both a sacred and cultural landmark. In the Lundayeh belief system, *Ulung Buayeh* represents the intersection of the physical and spiritual realms, a site where human courage, ancestral reverence, and ecological harmony converge. In the local Lundayeh dialect, *ulung* signifies “origin” or “source,” while *buayeh* means “crocodile” (Langub, 2003).

i. Headhunting Ritual and Sacred Space

Ulung Buayeh played a central role in the headhunting traditions of the Lundayeh people. It was not merely a symbolic monument but a spiritually charged site integral to their cosmological worldview. The mound functioned as a ritual space for communication with the spirit realm, particularly in matters of warfare, purification, and ancestral reverence. Before embarking on headhunting expeditions, warriors would seek spiritual strength and protection at sacred sites

such as *Ulung Buayeh*. The crocodile spirit, known as *Nui Ulung*, embodied ferocity, territorial power, and guardianship, traits considered essential for a successful headhunter (Talla, 1979).

Monuments such as *Ulung Buayeh* served to demarcate areas of both spiritual and territorial importance. Headhunting was more than a personal quest for honour; it was a communal assertion of dominance over land and sacred sites. These structures embodied historical memory, spiritual authority, and territorial legitimacy (Bala, 2008). In Lundayeh oral tradition, the crocodile is at times portrayed as a former headhunter spirit or a warrior transformed into a guardian entity, further reinforcing *Ulung Buayeh*'s position as a mythic-spiritual nexus that validates and empowers traditional codes of conduct (Hose & McDougall, 1912; Talla, 1979).

ii. Spiritual Purification and Protection

Upon returning from headhunting expeditions, Lundayeh warriors performed purification rites at *Ulung Buayeh*, a sacred process known as *mamat*. These rituals were intended to cleanse the warrior of malevolent forces or vengeful spirits associated with the slain. Neglecting such rites was believed to invite afflictions, including illness or misfortune (Crain, 1978; Langub, 2003). Dreams involving crocodiles were often regarded as omens, either blessings or warnings, that required interpretation by ritual specialists or village elders (Talla, 1979). Adherence to the sacred protocols surrounding *Ulung Buayeh* was therefore essential to maintaining spiritual balance and ensuring personal well-being.

iii. Offerings to Ancestral Spirits

Ulung Buayeh also functioned as a ceremonial site for offering tributes to ancestral spirits and protective deities. Enemy heads taken during expeditions were presented as tokens of valor, intended to secure blessings and continued protection for the community. Such offerings symbolized the transference of *semangat* (life force), believed to enhance fertility, vitality, and collective prosperity (Sather, 2006). Sacrificial gifts such as animal blood or heirloom beads were made to appease *Nui Ulung*, the guardian spirit, in exchange for spiritual protection and success. The nearby river regarded as a liminal space between the human and spirit worlds, further amplified *Ulung Buayeh*'s significance in rites of passage and purification (Talla, 1979).

Ulung Buayeh is also revered as the dwelling place of a guardian spirit known as *Tawun*. According to Lundayeh oral tradition, it is connected to the community's myth of creation and is regarded as the place where ancestral spirits first descended to establish the foundations of social and spiritual life (Bala, 2008). Practices such as ancestral worship, ritual offerings (*ipung*), and taboos against encroachment embody a worldview that values harmony between humans and the metaphysical realm. Moreover, the site functions as a narrative space

where myths and stories are transmitted orally, reinforcing communal identity, continuity, and respect for ancestral wisdom.

iv. Ecological Resource and Traditional Knowledge

Situated near rivers, forests, and valleys, *Ulung Buayeh* forms part of an ecologically rich landscape that sustains the Lundayeh community. The area provides vital natural resources such as freshwater fish, rattan, medicinal plants, and other non-timber forest products (Zawawi, 2010). Embedded within this landscape is a body of traditional ecological knowledge that reflects generations of environmental stewardship. Practices such as seasonal harvesting, the conservation of *tana' ulun* (sacred land), and *ipung* (temporary fishing bans) demonstrate a sustainable environmental ethic deeply rooted in indigenous wisdom and the community's reciprocal relationship with nature.

v. Social and Traditional Educational Centre

As a neutral yet sacred space, *Ulung Buayeh* plays a vital role in the social fabric of the Lundayeh community. It serves as a venue for key life-cycle ceremonies, including youth initiation rites, conflict resolution processes, and communal deliberations. Traditional justice and conflict mediation practices, including *adat ba'at* (peace negotiations), are conducted here, reflecting the community's deep commitment to social harmony and collective well-being (Crain, 1978). The site also functions as an informal educational space where elders transmit knowledge of customs, taboos, and survival skills to younger generations, by reinforcing *Ulung Buayeh's* enduring role as a community-based institution for cultural learning and intergenerational continuity.



Figure 1: Image and Shape of Ulung Buayeh
Source: Abd Talib et al. (2022)

The Abandoned *Ulung Buayeh* of Long Pasia

Once the ceremonial and communal heart of the Lundayeh people, *Ulung Buayeh* has witnessed a gradual erosion of its spiritual and cultural significance as social, religious, economic, and policy forces have reshaped community life. Although modernisation has brought improvements in education and infrastructure, it has simultaneously weakened the continuity and visibility of local cultural heritage, leaving sacred sites such as *Ulung Buayeh* increasingly vulnerable to neglect.

i. Modernisation and the Christianisation of the Lundayeh Community

Since the early 20th century, the Lundayeh have experienced significant religious and social transformation, particularly following the introduction of Christianity into the interior regions of Borneo. Evangelical and Anglican missionary movements promoted a monotheistic worldview that rejected traditional animist beliefs and ancestral spirit worship (Langub, 2003; Crain, 1978). As a result, rituals once central to *Ulung Buayeh*, such as *ipung* (spiritual offerings) and the veneration of *Tawun* spirits, came to be regarded as incompatible with Christian teachings. This religious shift led many community members including traditional leaders to abandon long-held ceremonial practices. Consequently, *Ulung Buayeh*'s role as a sacred communal site diminished, and its spiritual relevance within contemporary Lundayeh life continues to fade as new religious identities take precedence.

ii. Migration and the Marginalisation of Traditional Spaces

Economic demands and the pursuit of formal education have driven widespread migration among younger Lundayeh to urban centres such as Miri, Kota Kinabalu, and beyond. This rural-to-urban movement has led to the depopulation of ancestral villages, leaving sacred sites like *Ulung Buayeh* increasingly isolated (Bala, 2008). The outmigration of younger generations has disrupted the transmission of cultural knowledge and weakened the intergenerational bonds that once sustained rituals and oral traditions. As community engagement with *Ulung Buayeh* diminishes, its role as a site of cultural learning and collective identity continues to fade, and its symbolic meanings risk being forgotten within the pressures of modern life.

iii. Government Development Policies and Urban-Centric Planning

In Malaysia, development priorities centred on roads, dams, and agricultural expansion have often overshadowed Indigenous cultural preservation. Consequently, sacred sites like *Ulung Buayeh* remain absent from formal land-use, heritage, and tourism planning (Zawawi, 2010; Nicholas, 2000). The absence of legal or administrative recognition renders these sites highly vulnerable to encroachment and unregulated development. In some cases, traditional lands have been exploited without the free, prior, and informed consent of local

communities. This situation reflects a broader disconnect between Indigenous worldviews and top-down development models that fail to recognise or integrate intangible cultural heritage into national planning priorities.

iv. Lack of Documentation and Legal Protection

A critical threat to *Ulung Buayeh*'s preservation is the absence of legal recognition and systematic documentation. Many culturally significant sites within Indigenous territories remain unregistered under national heritage legislation or excluded from community-based forest governance frameworks (Colchester, 2002). *Ulung Buayeh* is no exception. Its cultural protocols, oral histories, and geospatial boundaries are preserved primarily through the memories of ageing elders. Without formal documentation or protective legislation, the site remains highly vulnerable to degradation, neglect, and eventual erasure from collective memory.

v. Changing Cultural Values and Youth Perception

Globalisation, together with increasing exposure to urban lifestyles through education, media, and digital technologies, has reshaped the cultural perceptions of Lundayeh youth. Traditional beliefs and rituals are often regarded as outdated or irrelevant, particularly among those raised outside the ancestral homeland (Sather, 2006). *Ulung Buayeh*, once revered as a sacred living landscape, is now frequently perceived as a relic of the past. The narratives, symbolism, and communal meanings once embedded in the site are seldom invoked, diminishing its role as a marker of collective identity. Unless intentional, community-driven revitalisation efforts are undertaken, *Ulung Buayeh* risks fading into nostalgic memory rather than enduring as a living expression of Lundayeh heritage.

***Ulung Buayeh* as a Model for Community-Based Tourism (CBT)**

Ulung Buayeh, or the "crocodile mound," is a traditional ritual site that holds deep cultural significance for the Lundayeh people of Long Pasia, a remote highland village in Sabah, Malaysia. Historically, these mounds were constructed by returning warriors to symbolise triumph and spiritual strength, accompanied by ceremonial dances and the striking of the effigy with a traditional sword known as the *felefet*. Although the original ritual practices diminished following the spread of Christianity in the 1930s, *Ulung Buayeh* remains a powerful symbol of Lundayeh identity and heritage, reinterpreted today through symbolic foods, such as *luba' buayeh* (crocodile-shaped rice) and community storytelling (Daily Express, 2018).

While traditional practices have declined under religious influence and official discouragement, they continue in modified yet culturally accepted forms. For instance, during wedding ceremonies, the bride's family prepares a *luba' buayeh* made of cooked rice, which the couple cuts at the back of the crocodile's

neck before the feast begins. Similarly, at the *Irau Rayeh Lundayeh* festival, miniature crocodile replicas are ceremonially cut by VIPs to mark the opening or closing of key events. The crocodile motif also appears in traditional male attire and headdresses, symbolising strength, heroism, and ancestral pride in Lundayeh culture (Ganang, 2018).

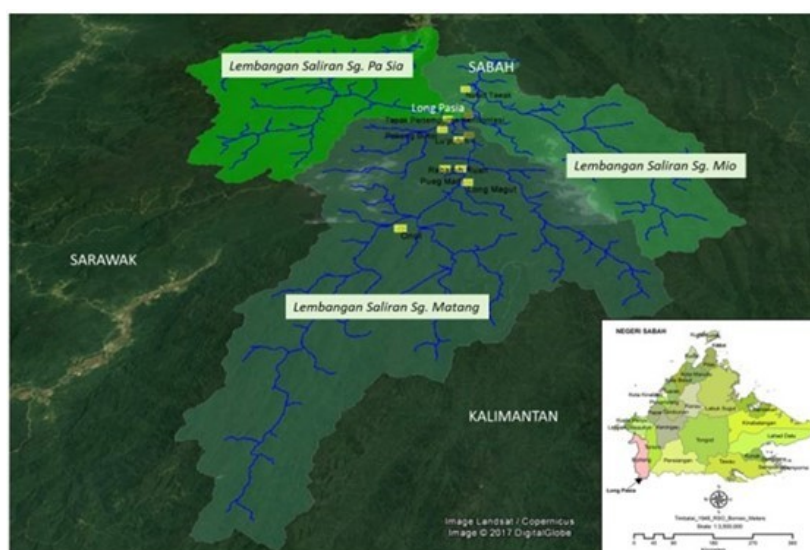


Figure 2: Ulung Buayeh Site Locations Based on River Basins and Networks.

Source: Abd Talip et al (2022)

This cultural heritage has been successfully integrated into the village's community-based tourism (CBT) framework. In Long Pasia, CBT emphasises the active participation and ownership of tourism initiatives by the local Lundayeh community. Instead of passively receiving external tourism investment, the community has developed an inclusive model that centres on Indigenous culture, environmental sustainability, and local economic development.

Ulung Buayeh plays a pivotal role in this model as both a cultural anchor and a key tourism attraction. Visitors to Long Pasia are introduced to *Ulung Buayeh* through guided storytelling sessions, site visits to ancient mound locations, demonstrations of traditional food preparation, and participatory cultural festivals. Homestay programmes allow tourists to experience daily life in a Lundayeh household, often featuring *luba' buayeh* during weddings or ceremonial meals. Local guides, particularly youth trained in cultural interpretation, play a pivotal role as intermediaries in conveying ecological and

mythological knowledge linked to *Ulung Buayeh* and other sacred landmarks, including the footprints of Upai Semaring (Sabah Tourism Board, n.d.).

The CBT model also supports ongoing environmental conservation efforts. Long Pasia lies within a biodiverse tropical highland ecosystem, and several *Ulung Buayeh* sites are located in ecologically sensitive zones. The integration of cultural and natural heritage within tourism routes promotes a strong conservation ethic among both residents and visitors. Community initiatives, including the mapping of sacred landscapes and collaborations with NGOs such as WWF and FORMADAT, have strengthened local capacity to protect ancestral territories while diversifying sustainable livelihood opportunities.



Figure 3: The Bride and Groom Symbolically Cut the Luba' Buayeh
Source: Ganang et al. (2018)

Economically, the *Ulung Buayeh*-based tourism model has diversified village income, particularly benefiting women, youth, and cultural practitioners. Tourism revenues are reinvested into education, infrastructure, and heritage documentation projects. Notably, the revival of the *Nui Ulung Agung* ritual ceremony in 2016, held in conjunction with Long Pasia's recognition as a recipient of the UN Equator Prize, exemplified the synergy between cultural revitalisation and sustainable development. The event brought together traditional leaders, local youth, and visitors in a powerful demonstration of how CBT can rejuvenate indigenous traditions while reinforcing environmental and cultural stewardship.

In essence, *Ulung Buayeh* represents more than a historical artifact; it is a dynamic cultural asset that illustrates the potential of community-based tourism (CBT) to safeguard intangible heritage while fostering socio-economic resilience. The case of Long Pasia illustrates how ethically managed and community-driven Indigenous narratives can inform models of sustainable and culturally rooted tourism development.

Key Dimensions of the *Ulung Buayeh* Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Model

The success of community-based tourism (CBT) in Long Pasia can be best understood through several interrelated dimensions that reflect the integration of cultural heritage, community participation, environmental stewardship, and economic sustainability. Each dimension demonstrates how *Ulung Buayeh* functions not only as a cultural symbol but also as a catalyst for local empowerment and ecological awareness. Together, these interconnected elements form the foundation of a holistic CBT model that aligns traditional Lundayeh values with contemporary principles of sustainable tourism.

i. Cultural Heritage as the Foundation

The *Ulung Buayeh* crocodile-shaped earth mounds built by Lundayeh warriors represent a tangible and enduring link to the community's ancestral past. Traditionally erected to celebrate headhunting victories, these effigies formed part of elaborate communal rituals that combined storytelling, dancing, and feasting. Although the headhunting era has long ended, the symbolism of the crocodile endures through modern practices such as *luba' buayeh* (crocodile-shaped rice prepared during ceremonies), local folktales, handicrafts, and community festivals.

Integrating these ancient effigy mounds into community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives offers opportunities to promote awareness and safeguard these culturally significant landmarks. This heritage provides a powerful foundation for CBT that reinforces Lundayeh identity and ancestral wisdom, aligning with broader sustainable development goals that emphasise environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and community empowerment (Hemming & Pugh, 2019). With responsible community stewardship, *Ulung Buayeh* can be presented to visitors as a living heritage site that promotes cultural interpretation, ecological education, and economic opportunities through local crafts, guided tours, and traditional performances, while ensuring that the site's sanctity and ecological integrity are respected. Although the physical carving of *Ulung Buayeh* has faded with time, the Lundayeh people continue to preserve its symbolic meaning through ritual songs and traditional foods (Ganang, 2022).

ii. Tourism Rooted in Local Participation

Community-based tourism (CBT) in Long Pasia is fully owned and managed by the Lundayeh community. Local community serve as guides, homestay hosts, storytellers, and craft producers, ensuring that tourism activities remain rooted in local culture and values. The story of *Ulung Buayeh* is shared during village tours, cultural performances, and at the local museum, reinforcing the community's connection to its ancestral heritage.

CBT empowers villagers to control tourism narratives, protect sacred sites, and derive direct benefits from visitor spending. This participatory model has strengthened Lundayeh cultural identity while promoting tourism that is respectful, inclusive, and community-driven (Ganesan et al., 2021).

iii. Environmental and Cultural Sustainability

Ulung Buayeh is deeply embedded within Long Pasia's forested landscape, an area renowned for its ecological richness and biodiversity. Community-based tourism (CBT) in the region integrates natural conservation with cultural safeguarding, positioning both as complementary pillars of sustainable development. Villagers lead ecotours through sacred landscapes, waterfalls, and forest trails, weaving nature experiences together with cultural narratives.

The mapping of *Ulung Buayeh* sites has been proposed to establish "archaeo-ecotourism zones," enhancing both environmental protection and educational engagement. The preservation of ancient *Ulung Buayeh* effigies can thus be integrated into sustainable tourism planning to promote awareness, protect cultural landscapes, and reinforce the community's long-standing relationship with the natural environment (Abd Talip et al., 2022).

iv. Economic Empowerment and Cultural Revival

Tourism centred on *Ulung Buayeh* has generated new economic opportunities through homestays, local guiding, food preparation, and handicraft production, particularly benefiting youth and women. Income derived from community-based tourism (CBT) is reinvested into village infrastructure, education, and cultural revitalisation initiatives such as the *Nui Ulung Agung* ceremony, held to celebrate Long Pasia's receipt of the UN Equator Prize. The *Nui Ulung Agung* event exemplifies how traditional Lundayeh practices are being revived through community tourism, effectively linking cultural identity with sustainable development (Daily Express Sabah, 2018).

v. Model of Respectful, Community-Led Tourism

Ulung Buayeh-based community-based tourism (CBT) in Long Pasia exemplifies how Indigenous knowledge and heritage can drive bottom-up tourism initiatives. It emphasises respect for sacred traditions, environmental ethics, and community autonomy, aligning closely with the UNWTO's principles of sustainable and

inclusive tourism. Engaging the local community in research and heritage-based activities fosters the co-creation of knowledge and elevates the site's standing as a legitimate cultural and ecological research area (Colchester, 2002). Such academic collaboration further validates the significance of *Ulung Buayeh* within both national and international heritage discourses.

When thoughtfully designed and implemented, tourism can serve as a powerful instrument for cultural revitalisation and sustainable development. By integrating Indigenous cultural practices, environmental education, and community leadership, *Ulung Buayeh* can be reimagined as a dynamic ecotourism destination. These efforts not only safeguard the unique heritage of the Lundayeh people but also ensure its continued relevance and vitality in an increasingly globalised world.

CONCLUSION

Ulung Buayeh represents a profoundly significant cultural heritage for the Lundayeh community, reflecting not only spiritual and historical dimensions but also symbolising the symbiotic relationship between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits. Within the Lundayeh worldview, *Ulung Buayeh* is understood as a cosmological space that bridges human existence with metaphysical and ecological realms. It is a sacred locus embodying deep reverence for nature as a living entity imbued with spirit, and a site for ritual practices where traditions, customs, and taboos have been passed down through generations.

In the current socio-cultural context, characterised by modernisation, rural migration, and the marginalisation of heritage in national development agendas, numerous *Ulung Buayeh* sites have fallen into neglect due to the absence of systematic conservation measures. Contributing factors include the erosion of cultural values among younger generations, the influence of external religions that discredit animistic traditions, and the lack of comprehensive heritage preservation policies. Collectively, these challenges raise serious concerns about the continuity of Lundayeh's intangible cultural heritage, which is becoming increasingly fragile.

In this context, *Ulung Buayeh* holds immense potential to be developed as a focal point for community-based tourism (CBT), offering an integrated approach that combines heritage conservation with sustainable socio-economic development. When developed holistically and guided by local cultural values, heritage-based tourism can serve as a platform for cross-cultural education and mutual understanding between visitors and host communities. Activities such as guided visits to *Ulung Buayeh* sites, culturally sensitive ritual demonstrations, the documentation and reinterpretation of local myths, and the establishment of cultural interpretation centres can revive *Ulung Buayeh*'s role as a social, spiritual, and educational space.

Moreover, such initiatives provide an ethical and alternative source of income for the Lundayeh community, provided that cultural ownership and narrative authority remain under community control. The active participation of the Lundayeh in every stage of tourism planning and implementation, coupled with policy support from state authorities through heritage gazettement, and partnerships with academics, NGOs, and tourism practitioners, is essential for the long-term sustainability of *Ulung Buayeh*. These collaborative efforts not only advance the broader agenda of Indigenous heritage preservation in Malaysia but also reaffirm tourism's potential as an inclusive, equitable, and culturally grounded instrument for sustainable development.

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