

## The Tales, Functions and the Peoples of Pasar Borneo in Johor

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### Abstract

Flea markets are widespread in Malaysia, offering vendors the opportunity to sell their diverse range of items from clothing or household goods to new items such as fresh food. Many of the first flea markets began as open-air markets established by immigrant communities in large urban centers. The markets offered immigrants the opportunity to trade in business centers that met the needs of their communities. However, less is known about how immigrants influence and are influenced by flea markets. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the role of this Pasar Borneo on society by examining who the people are who participate in this Pasar Borneo and what functions this Pasar Borneo has for those who do participate. The experiences of the people who participate as sellers, buyers, or simply as visitors to the Pasar Borneo will allow for a better understanding of the multiple roles these markets play for the community, such as a destination, economic opportunity, and a place for nostalgia and cultural representation. An equally important function of Pasar Borneo is that it provides the platform and space, through its product and people, to develop and maintain social relationships with each other and the host community.

**Keywords:** Flea Market, Pasar Borneo, Travel Destination Economic Opportunity, Cultural Display

### Introduction

Flea market or also known as street market is widely used in Malaysia. For some people, the mention of flea markets paints a picture of chaotic, crowded people either looking for specific flea market products or even entertainment. Flea markets offer vendors the opportunity to sell their diverse range of items, from items such as clothing or household

supplies to new products such as fresh food. They are often seasonal, but the recent development of flea markets in Malaysia is either formal with long-term leases and in a much more fixed market style or casual with more seasonal market types or short-term leases. Ha (2014) describes that a flea market is a closed or open area where traders sell various items from un-partitioned stalls. Selling activities are described as informal as there are no regulations and customers usually pay in cash.

Almost every state in Malaysia has its own well-known flea market and even recommends it as one of the must-visit destinations when you pay a visit to the state. For instance, the most popular flea market is the flea market at Amcorp Shopping Center in Petaling Jaya, Selangor which still exists today. The flea market at Amcorp Mall is considered to be the "Largest Indoor Flea Market" in the country, as stated in the Malaysia Book of records, and has been in existence since the mall opened in 1998. In addition, for those who visit Ipoh, Loken, as it is fondly called by the locals, is one of the tourist destinations in Ipoh and is described as a nostalgic place with nostalgic things that bring back childhood memories. When you go to Penang, the trip would not be complete without a detour to Butterworth to discover the island's oldest flea market with a growing number of bustling stalls selling second-hand items, antiques, new clothes, traditional medicines, old books and even costume jewelry.

As can be seen, the names for these markets sometimes varied, as they were sometimes based on the locality or even the assortment of products sold at that flea market. Sometimes residents also named them after the names of the local ethnic groups associated with them. Regardless of the name, however, the essence of flea markets remained the same, as they functioned as places where people could bargain for an assortment of new and used goods.

Most studies on the flea market focused on the characteristics of the flea market (Sherman et al., 1985; Ackerman & Walker, 2012; Petrescu & Bhatli, 2013; Ha, 2014; Zakariyah et al., 2016), the structure of flea market (Sherry & John, 1990) and flea market from the context of marketing where they argue that flea market as a second class marketing system (Petrescu & Bhatli, 2013) and the visitors motivations when they shop at flea market (Tauber, 1972). Many of the first flea markets began as open-air markets established by immigrant communities in large urban centers. The markets offered immigrants the opportunity to trade in business centers that met the needs of their communities. However, how immigrants influenced and were influenced by the flea market is less well known. For example, Pasar Borneo in Masai, Johor Bahru. It is known as "Mini Sarawak" in Johor and was officially opened to the public in 2007. It is considered Pasar Tamu Dayak probably because most of the vendors are from the Dayak category.

The purpose of this simple qualitative study, then, is to explore the role of this Pasar Borneo for society by examining who the people are who participate in this Pasar Borneo and what functions this Pasar Borneo has for those who do participate.

### **Pasar Borneo and Travel Destination**

The flea market has presented itself as an opportunity for tourists to participate in exciting and mysterious adventures. Thus, it is not surprising that the flea market has been introduced as a tourist destination in Malaysia. The same notion is given to Pasar Borneo in Masai Johor. The media in Malaysia has presented Pasar Borneo as a must visit place when visiting Johor.

Sample 1:

*Sayuran tradisional Sarawak hanya boleh didapati diPasar Borneo – dan ini menjadi tarikan kepada Pasar Borneo khususnya kepada orang Sarawak yang ingin mendapatkan sayur-sayuran kegemaran mereka*

Sample 2:

*Sayuran tradisional Sarawak hanya boleh didapati diPasar Borneo – dan ini menjadi tarikan kepada Pasar Borneo khususnya kepada orang Sarawak yang ingin mendapatkan sayur-sayuran kegemaran mereka*

For a much wealthier category of people, visiting a place like Pasar Borneo could offer them more than just a shopping experience. Their primary motive was not to shop, but simply to browse and have a fun day. Finally, most flea markets, including Pasar Borneo, are marketed or advertised as enticing because they are fun and boil down to family entertainment. For the new visitors (non-Sarawakians), Pasar Borneo offers the opportunity to spend a fun day for families. Children enjoyed munching on hot dogs while their parents happily browsed for bargains. These niche markets grew into very large affairs that appealed to a specific audience who came for the products, the community, the experience or even the adventure (who knows). For the Sarawak community, Pasar Borneo provides the products they can identify with while reminding them of the taste of "home" and helping to reduce their "homesickness".

Sample 1:

*Hanya produk-produk makanan dan hasil-hasil hutan dipastikan dijual disitu bagi mengekalkan identity Pasar Borneo.*

Sample 2:

Pelbagai sayuran segar dari hutan dan produk makanan dari Sarawak dijual diPasar Borneo. Kami juga menawarkan ikan yang menjadi kegemaran masyarakat Sarawak. Kepelbagaian sayur hutan menjadi tarikan kepada yang pertama kali berkunjung.

### **Pasar Borneo and Economic Opportunity**

Pasar Borneo is important not only because it provides social opportunities for communities, but at the same time, it also creates an economic space for the community in Sarawak. Their experience in the market provided them with many opportunities to advance themselves and their families economically, socially and educationally. Many of them hoped that their children would also have the opportunity to sell in the new market. Since most of the vendors are women, they have turned to the informal economy to meet their basic daily needs. They continue to rely on the Pasar Borneo for support to provide for their families.

Sample 1:

*okay sikitlah, boleh cari makan*

Sample 2:

Pendapatan peniaga meningkatlah sebab pengunjung pun ramai, jadi kita bercadang untuk menambah hari operasi daripada 3 hari setiap hari kepada 5 hari

seminggu berdasarkan sambutannya. Sambutan pun memuaskan. Promosi diadakan untuk Pasar Borneo, orang di Sarawak dah tahu, orang Sarawak yang di Semenanjung pun tahu

### **Pasar Borneo as Nostalgic and Cultural Display**

Pasar Borneo always attracted onlookers to witness the circus of various people and objects. For new visitors, the experience offered via the products sold at Pasar Borneo is indeed valuable. Products such as a T-shirt or a handbag with a traditional Dayak motif are seen as a cultural performance and help to highlight the identity of the Dayak people from Sarawak. For Sarawakians who earn their living in Johor or any other parts of Peninsular Malaysia, Pasar Borneo serves as their comfort place. It is this place of comfort and its products like "daun jabang tutok" and "upa lalis" or "midin" that help them remember the "taste of home". Again, it will be this place of comfort that will help them feel like home (asai ke ba menua) when they are surrounded by the same people they can easily meet when they are still in Sarawak. For them, Pasar Borneo is more than a flea market but a flea market that has also helped to define and showcase the culture of the community. They can participate in various cultural events such as "pekit kumang and keeling Gawai" held in conjunction with the Gawai Dayak festival, or even attend concerts featuring Iban artists flown in from Sarawak such as Andrewson Ngalai and Rickie Andrewson, to name a few.

To notably some of them, selling at the Pasar Borneo used as a good way to replay the memories from their homes or "kampong halaman".

Sample 1:

*Datang sini untuk mencari makanan dari kampong halaman mereka*

### **Pasar Borneo and its people**

Many people defined flea markets by the products sold at them, but the ideas about the people who attended them also influenced how the public viewed them. Therefore, it is not surprising that they refer to these Pasar Borneo as all the vendors were from Sarawak and mainly sold products related to Sarawak such as "midin", "upa lalis" and "ulat mulong". For the newly arrived Sarawakians, the nature of exchange at the market provided a familiar environment in their new and foreign surroundings. It also gave them the opportunity to do business in their own language. These people brought their culture with them, which included trade, and so it is not surprising that there is a monopoly or dominance of one ethnic category (Iban) at the Pasar Borneo.

Sample 1:

*Kebanyakan disini memang Ibanlah, dan banyak kaum ibu-ibu.*

Customers also came from a variety of different ethnic groups. In the beginning, most buyers are also from Sarawak and it is only in recent years that the trend of buyers is changing to a mix of people, including those originally from Peninsular Malaysia. Perhaps curiosity and a desire to experience the area are the main motives for this group of buyers to visit Pasar Borneo. For some, they come for a day to experience the market, even if their main goal is to buy. They might have chosen the Pasar Borneo because it offered a different kind of shopping experience compared to the existing "Pasar Malam". Some of them enjoyed the personal

attention they received from the vendors and the community atmosphere or even the products offered by the vendors at this Pasar Borneo.

Sample 1:

*Yang datang beli sini campur-campurlah. Ramai yang beli, sekarang dia tak kira mana bangsa, orang semenanjung sini pun ada yang datang beli. Kebanyakan orang Sarawak dia suka makan ni (speaking of ubi tutok). Orang sini dia tak berapa pandai makan ni. Kalau Melayu Sarawak, dia pandailah makan ni.*

What is certain is that most of the sellers are women. Nearly 90% of salesmen are of the female category. Perhaps the most pertinent justification for this trend is the high cost of living, which necessitates that both the husband and wife look for job and income opportunities. The husband may already have a secure job and a factory or private business nearby, so now it all falls on the wife. Since Pasar Borneo is currently open to the public on weekdays that leaves only the wife. For these women vendors, Pasar Borneo provides an opportunity for economic advancement by participating in the market. This woman, like many others, sold in the market to provide better opportunities for her sons, which eventually led to this man becoming a successful doctor or engineer one day.

Pasar Borneo has served Sarawakians with various functions since its inception. Besides providing a place for economic opportunities, Pasar Borneo has fulfilled its most important function - a place for community engagement. The establishment of Pasar Borneo was initially as a meeting place after Sunday services in nearby churches. A few years later, more and more shops were added, selling famous delicacies from Sarawak such as Kolo mee and Laksa Sarawak. In addition, Pasar Borneo was a proud host for community activities such as Pesta Gawai and concerts featuring local Sarawak artists such as Melissa Francis and Andrewson Ngalai. The market had a community-like atmosphere. The owner of the market sought out her own family members, friends and people who were related to each other to staff her market. It is hard not to see the sense of community that existed between the vendors. The family metaphor was prevalent in the barter market and implied a form of cooperative collectivism where they had regular and close contact with each other both inside and outside the market. The presence of this sense of community includes, to some extent, the consumers, who often developed good relationships with the regular sellers - whom they eventually came to regard as one of them, or "kitai sebala".

Since the customers came from a variety of different ethnic groups, it is not surprising that some of them, whether buyers or sellers, developed special skills in the market. They also acquired new language skills to speak with customers from different states or different cultural backgrounds. They spoke a lot of languages, such as Mandarin, not fluently; but they spoke them commercially so that they could make a sale.

## Conclusion

Social interaction is one of the important elements and a result of the exchange of products in marketplaces. What we can take from the above is that the consumption of meaning in exchange with the products offered on Pasar Borneo. As shown above, many meanings are created through the exchange experience.

For the sellers, their products provide many opportunities to advance themselves and their families economically, socially, and educationally. Their experiences in the marketplace help them succeed in other areas of their lives as well. They have learned a lot about life and business. For those shoppers who have come with the intention of buying, the social atmosphere and products offered at Pasar Borneo do indeed remind them of the authentic taste of "home" in their new place. However, there are also meanings that consumers associate with their participation that do not necessarily involve the exchange of products or money. They can derive pleasure just by attending and participating in the event. In addition, participants become highly involved in the experience as they are responsible for creating the experience for themselves and for others.

Undoubtedly, through visits, experiences and presence, Pasar Borneo will provide participants (sellers, buyers and visitors) with many types of pleasures, from economic opportunities, social atmosphere, and social engagement to the development of new language skills.

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