

# Integrating Tourism through the Development of Chalets Featuring Temiar Architecture in Pos Kuala Mu, Perak

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the integration of tourism with Temiar indigenous architecture in Pos Kuala Mu, Perak. Tourism has emerged as a meaningful platform for preserving Temiar identity, expressing strong appreciation for the authenticity of traditional chalets and encouraging their continued use. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation and thematic analysis. The research highlights how traditional chalet construction serves as both a cultural expression and a sustainable tourism initiative. Findings reveal that Temiar architectural practices are deeply rooted in ecological knowledge, utilizing forest-sourced materials to create dwellings that harmonize with the natural environment. Beyond cultural validation, chalet development has generated employment opportunities for villagers in construction, hospitality, and entrepreneurship, fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer and economic resilience. The study concludes that culturally responsive tourism planning can support both sustainable development and the safeguarding of indigenous traditions, particularly vernacular architecture.

**Keywords:** Temiar architecture, tourism, chalets, sustainable development, Pos Kuala Mu

## INTRODUCTION

In Peninsular Malaysia, the indigenous people known as Orang Asli, are categorized into three main ethnic groups. The Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay groups are the three main indigenous groupings in Malaysia, each comprising multiple sub-ethnic communities that collectively total 18 distinct subgroups (Table 1). Orang Asli settlements are generally located in forested areas across all Peninsular Malaysia states, except for Perlis and Penang (Abraham et al., 2021; Kamal & Lim, 2019). According to the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), the highest concentration of Orang Asli populations in 2024 was recorded in Pahang with approximately 84,071 individuals, followed by Perak with 62,134, then Selangor with 21,628, and Kelantan with 19,308 (JAKOA, 2024).

Table 1: Ethnic subgroups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia

Main Ethnic	Sub-ethnic	Ethnic Distributions (by states)
Negrito	Bateq	Kelantan, Pahang
	Jahai	Perak, Kelantan
	Kensiu	Kedah
	Kintaq	Kedah
	Mendriq	Perak, Kelantan, Pahang
	Lanoh	Perak, Kelantan

Senoi	Temiar	Kelantan, Perak
	Semai	Pahang, Perak, Selangor
	Jah Hut	Pahang
	Che Wong	Pahang
	Semoq Beri	Pahang, Terengganu
	Mah Meri	Selangor
Melayu Proto	Temuan	Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Johor, Melaka
	Jakun	Pahang, Johor
	Semelai	Pahang, Negeri Sembilan
	Orang Kuala	Johor
	Orang Seletar	Johor
	Orang Kanaq	Johor

Source: JAKOA (2025) & Abraham et al., (2021)

The Orang Asli possess a unique identity and culture that distinguishes them from other mainstream ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia, such as the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. These communities hold valuable cultural heritage and traditions that must be wisely preserved (Isa et al., 2016). Isa et al. (2016) further emphasized that their distinctive identity, rooted in natural heritage, allows them to participate in tourism initiatives. Such involvement can indirectly support the long-term preservation of their cultural identity and traditions and enhance their economic activities.

One of the most valuable aspects of the Orang Asli cultural heritage is their vernacular architecture, which is typically constructed using natural resources such as bamboo, wood, rattan, and palm leaves. These structures symbolize a nature-based design way of life that reflects the community's deep reliance on and connection to the forest ecosystem. The architectural forms are not merely functional but are embedded with ecological wisdom and cultural symbolism, shaped by generations of lived experience in tropical environments.

Lambin et al. (2019) state that the Orang Asli possess rich indigenous knowledge systems closely tied to sustainable environmental practices. This knowledge informs their material selection, construction techniques, and spatial organization, prioritizing ecological balance, resource stewardship, and climatic responsiveness. Their architectural traditions demonstrate an intuitive understanding of sustainability by minimizing environmental impact and harmonizing built structures with natural surroundings. As such, Orang Asli vernacular architecture serves as a cultural expression and a living model of sustainable design rooted in indigenous environmental ethics.

Therefore, this study highlights the participation of the Temiar indigenous community in tourism as a means to sustain their vernacular architecture. The construction of chalets serves as one of the key tourism initiatives, providing overnight accommodation for visitors to experience traditional Orang Asli Temiar dwellings. In addition to cultural preservation, this tourism effort contributes to economic development by generating income through chalet rentals.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Indigenous Identity of Orang Asli

The Orang Asli are a minority group in Malaysia, distinguished by their unique cultural heritage, religious practices, socio-economic lifestyles, and belief systems that set them apart from other major ethnic communities. Their way of life is closely connected to the natural environment and shaped by traditional customs and a subsistence-based economy rooted in ancestral knowledge (Abdullah et al., 2020). This deep relationship with nature is evident in their reliance on forest resources for food, shelter, medicine, and cultural expression. Their forest-based knowledge reflects a valuable set of survival skills and ecological understanding that distinguishes them from other communities.

The Orang Asli possess tangible and intangible cultural heritage that must be preserved for future generations (Ab Rahman et al., 2024). Tangible heritage includes physical elements such as traditional dwellings, tools, crafts, clothing, and sacred sites. For instance, their vernacular architecture showcases indigenous construction techniques using natural materials such as bamboo, timber, palm leaves, and rattan, demonstrating ecological wisdom and adaptation to the tropical climate (Tuah et al., 2025). In contrast, intangible heritage encompasses non-material aspects such as oral traditions, rituals, spiritual beliefs, language, folklore, and environmental knowledge systems. These intangible elements are often transmitted orally and through lived practice, forming the backbone of Orang Asli identity and worldview. Their close relationship with the forest, communal customs, and spiritual connection to nature are key intangible heritage expressions shaping their daily life and cultural resilience.

The cultural identity of the Orang Asli is increasingly at risk due to growing exposure to and acceptance of modernization (Mustapha et al., 2024). As younger generations become more integrated into mainstream society, traditional practices, beliefs, and knowledge systems face the threat of erosion. Furthermore, many younger generations live in the city or out of the village for a better life due to employment and marriage (Kamal & Lim, 2019). In this context, preserving both tangible and intangible forms of heritage is essential to safeguard the unique identity of the Orang Asli and enrich Malaysia's broader cultural landscape. To ensure long-term cultural sustainability, efforts to protect and promote their heritage must be inclusive, respectful and rooted in community participation.

### Indigenous Participation in Cultural Tourism

Community and cultural elements are widely recognized as key drivers in attracting tourists to a destination. According to Isa et al. (2016), contemporary tourists increasingly seek distinctive and authentic experiences that offer meaningful engagement beyond conventional sightseeing. They are drawn to unique tourism products and often prefer direct, hands-on interaction with local cultures and traditions. In this context, Indigenous tourism, considered a subset of cultural tourism, is vital in preserving cultural heritage while enhancing Indigenous communities' economic well-being (Dahlan et al., 2023). By offering immersive experiences within natural and culturally rich environments, Indigenous tourism fosters deeper appreciation among visitors and supports sustainable development for host communities.

Hamid et al. (2022) highlight that the 12th Malaysia Plan supports inclusive growth by expanding economic opportunities for marginalized communities, including Indigenous groups. This policy framework aligns with global trends in cultural tourism, where travellers increasingly seek authentic experiences rooted in local heritage. In addition, tourism presents a promising avenue for the development of rural and Indigenous tourism initiatives.

Within this context, the Temiar community initiative to develop chalets in Pos Kuala Mu reflects a grassroots response to emerging tourism opportunities. These chalets function as accommodations and cultural touchpoints, allowing visitors to engage directly with traditional architecture, forest-based knowledge, and Temiar hospitality. By integrating tourism with heritage preservation, the community demonstrates how Indigenous-led development can sustain cultural identity while contributing to local economic resilience.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of the Temiar indigenous community in Pos Kuala Mu, Perak, with regard to their vernacular architectural practices and participation in tourism development. Phenomenology was selected as the guiding approach to uncover the meanings, values, and perceptions embedded in the community's spatial traditions and cultural expressions. This design is appropriate for capturing the depth and nuance of indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in relation to architecture and heritage-based tourism. There are two main types of data collected in this study, primary and secondary. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with community members, participatory observation of architectural practices and tourism activities. Next, secondary data were also gathered from various sources to support the primary findings and provide contextual depth. All data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring experiential patterns and culturally embedded meanings. The study focused on how Temiar individuals perceive, embody, and negotiate the relationship between their architectural heritage and tourism initiatives, particularly concerning ecological values, spatial identity, and cultural continuity.

### Study Site

Pos Kuala Mu is a remote highland settlement in the Sungai Siput district of Perak, Malaysia. The site was chosen due to its active engagement in tourism and its preservation of Temiar vernacular architecture. The construction of traditional-style chalets for visitor accommodation reflects the community's efforts to integrate cultural heritage into tourism initiatives. The settlement's geographic isolation and ecological richness further contribute to its significance as a case study for sustainable and culturally tourism planning.

### Informants

This study was among conducted the Temiar ethnic population in Pos Kuala Mu, Sungai Siput, Perak. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of individuals with direct experience and knowledge of Temiar architecture and tourism activities. The informants included local builders and chalet operators. A total of 6 informants were recruited, reflecting diverse roles and perspectives within the community. Inclusion criteria required informants to be residents of Pos Kuala Mu and actively engaged in architectural practices or tourism-related initiatives.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Ecological Wisdom of the Orang Asli Temiar in Architecture

The Orang Asli are widely recognized for their deep connection to nature and reliance on forest ecosystems as an integral part of daily life. According to Abdullah et al. (2020), their survival skills and traditional knowledge passed down through generations reflect a remarkable and sophisticated understanding of ecological systems. This inherited wisdom is evident in their architectural practices, which demonstrate intuitive environmental responsiveness and sustainable resource use. Throughout the interviews, the informant emphasized that Temiar architecture is deeply rooted in ecological knowledge and forest-based living. This statement was supported by IR 1 & IR 2 :

“Seni bina rumah orang asli ni asalnya memang guna dari bahan alam semulajadi yang senang cari di hutan je.”

(IR1)

Translation:

“The indigenous architecture was originally built using only natural materials sourced easily from the forest.”

(IR1)

“Memang dari zaman nenek moyang lagi, kami buat rumah guna apa ada di hutan sahaja. Sebabnya, Orang Asli memang hidupnya berpindah randah di kawasan hutan.”

(IR2)

Translation:

“Since the time of our ancestors, we have always built our homes using only what is available in the forest. It is because the Orang Asli have traditionally lived a nomadic lifestyle within forested areas.”

(IR2)

Field observations in Pos Kuala Mu revealed that the construction of chalets for tourism continues to reflect this ecological wisdom. Pos Kuala Mu consists of 4 chalets: Chalet Bersah, Chalet Dusun, Chalet Gepeh and Chalet Pulau Tengah. Using locally sourced materials such as bamboo, wood, and Bertam leaves demonstrates resource availability and signifies the community’s inherited understanding of environmental cycles and sustainability.



Figure 1: Chalet Bersah

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Figure 1 illustrates Chalet Bersah located in Pos Kuala Mu. The chalet’s design retains traditional construction methods, utilizing natural resources from the surrounding forest. For the walls, the operator employs *Kelarai Bertam*, a woven pattern made from bertam leaves that requires intricate and precise craftsmanship. The roof is constructed using bertam leaves, beams (*alang*) and flooring incorporate wood and bamboo, respectively reflecting the vernacular building practices of the Temiar community. Based on the interviews, the chalet operators explained that *kelarai bertam* last longer than bamboo. IR 4 explained:

“*Kelarai bertam* ni agak tahan lama daripada buluh. *Kelarai bertam* boleh tahan 20-30 tahun jugak manakala buluh boleh tahan dalam masa 3-4 tahun je”

(IR4)

Translation:

“*Kelarai bertam* lasts longer than bamboo. It can hold up for about 20 to 30 years, while bamboo usually only lasts around 3 to 4 years.”

(IR4)





Figure 2: Chalet Dusun

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Chalet Dusun is located approximately 1.8 kilometres from Chalet Bersah. Figure 2 showcases one of its architectural designs, which reflects a firm adherence to traditional Temiar building practices. The walls and flooring are constructed entirely from bamboo, offering natural ventilation and thermal comfort. The roof is thatched using bertam leaves, while the structural pillars and beams (alang) are made from locally sourced timber harvested from the surrounding forest. This design exemplifies the use of indigenous materials and techniques in creating sustainable and culturally rooted tourist accommodations.



Figure 3: Chalet Gepeh (wall made from bamboo)



Figure 4: Chalet Gepeh (wall made from kelarai bertam)

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Chalet Gepeh shares many architectural similarities with other chalets in the area, particularly in layout, materials, and structural form. However, one distinguishing feature lies in the variation of wall construction techniques. Chalet Gepeh is built in two versions, each utilizing a different wall material, either bamboo or kelarai bertam (see Figures 3 & 4). The bamboo version reflects a more common and accessible approach, offering natural ventilation and ease of construction, though it typically requires more frequent maintenance due

to its shorter lifespan. In contrast, the version constructed with kelarai bertam showcases a woven wall technique using bertam leaves, which demands greater craftsmanship and precision. This variation highlights Temiar vernacular architecture's adaptability and reflects the community's evolving preferences in balancing tradition, functionality, and long-term sustainability within tourism development.



Figure 5: Chalet Pulau Tengah

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Chalet Pulau Tengah is adjacent to Chalet Gepeh, separated by a river that must be crossed to access the site. The chalet's design continues using traditional Temiar construction techniques, with walls made from chopped bamboo arranged vertically to allow for natural ventilation and simplicity in assembly. The roof is thatched using bertam leaves, providing effective insulation and rainwater runoff suited to the tropical climate. Structural components such as the beams and pillars are crafted from locally sourced timber, reflecting the community's reliance on forest resources and their deep-rooted knowledge of sustainable building practices.

### Cultural Continuity through Tourism Participation

Tuah et al. (2025) emphasized that tourism is a valuable platform for promoting Orang Asli heritage, including their architectural traditions, to external visitors. Pos Kuala Mu is widely recognized as a nature-based destination that authentically reflects the cultural identity of the Temiar community. In addition to its scenic natural landscape, visitors can rent traditional-style chalets and experience firsthand the ecological dwellings that are unique and distinct from conventional housing. Since its rise in popularity in 2018, Pos Kuala Mu has become a well-known destination and received a warm public reception. According to IR1, the chalets are consistently fully booked during holiday periods, reflecting strong interest and appreciation from visitors. Informant IR1, who operates chalets in the area, shared:

“Hari-hari cuti memang chalet selalu penuh. Memang chalet ini dapat sambutan yang menggalakkan dari orang luar”

(IR1)

Translation:

“During holidays, the chalets are always fully occupied. These chalets have received an encouraging response from outsiders”

(IR1)

There is also growing demand for traditional-style chalets in Pos Kuala Mu, particularly among tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences. Some visitors have admired the architectural uniqueness of these dwellings and encouraged the community to preserve their original design. According to informant IR3, some tourists explicitly requested that the traditional features be maintained, viewing them as a vital expression of Temiar identity. IR3 stated:

“Ada juga orang luar yang suruh kami kekalkan seni bina tradisional Temiar ini sebab sangat unik dan menarik”

(IR3)

Translation:

“Some outsiders have even encouraged us to preserve this traditional Temiar architecture because it is very unique and attractive”

(IR3)

This feedback reinforces the idea that tourism can serve as an economic opportunity and a platform for cultural validation. The continued use of indigenous materials and construction techniques such as kelarai bertam, bamboo, and forest-sourced timber reflects a conscious effort to sustain architectural heritage in the face of modern influences. In this way, tourism participation becomes a platform for cultural continuity, where external appreciation strengthens internal commitment to tradition. The construction of traditional-style chalets for tourism was viewed as a meaningful way to preserve Temiar identity while generating income. In addition, tourism through these chalets creates employment opportunities for villagers ranging from construction and maintenance to hospitality and cultural guiding.

### Employment Impact

The development of traditional-style chalets for tourism has produced employment opportunities for the Temiar community in Pos Kuala Mu, contributing to economic resilience and cultural empowerment. For instance, construction chalets engage a wide range of local skills, allowing elders to pass down specialized knowledge while younger villagers gain hands-on experience. This process sustains indigenous vernacular architecture and creates short-term and seasonal jobs in building and maintaining the chalets. The informant IR 3 shared :

“Untuk bina chalet ni, kami akan upah orang kampung ini je. Masih ada lagi orang tua dan orang muda yang mahir buat chalet ni. Kami orang tua la main peranan turunkan ilmu pada yang muda ni.”

(IR3)

Translation:

“To build these chalets, we only hire people from the village. There are still older folks and younger ones who know how to do it well. The elders play the role of passing down the skills to the younger generation.”

(IR3)

Besides that, tourism offers diverse employment opportunities to the local community. Local residents often fill these roles, enabling them to earn income without migrating to urban centres. Throughout the research, informant IR1, who is a chalet operator, stated that chalets require employees from the village to accommodate guests, manage chalets, handle housekeeping, and maintain facilities. IR1 explained :

“Pelancongan ini sangat membuka peluang pekerjaan kepada orang kampung ni. Sape yang nak kerja, kami akan bagi upahlah”

(IR1)

Translation:

“Tourism really opens up job opportunities for the villagers. Anyone who wants to work, we'll pay them.”

(IR1)





Figure 6: Housekeeping tasks involve local residents

Figure 6 depicts local residents engaged in housekeeping activities at the Pos Kuala Mu chalet. They are seen folding bed sheets and blankets after washing, and some are also responsible for cleaning the chalet before and after guests arrive and depart. These tasks reflect the active involvement of villagers in maintaining the chalets and ensuring a comfortable experience for visitors.

Lastly, tourism has encouraged entrepreneurial initiatives among the Temiar people in Pos Kuala Mu, including selling handicrafts and traditional local Temiar food (see figures 7 & 8). These businesses further diversify income sources and foster a sense of ownership over the tourism narrative. Importantly, the employment generated is not limited to economic gain and it reinforces community cohesion, strengthens intergenerational ties, and positions cultural heritage as a viable foundation for sustainable development.



Figure 7: Traditional Handicrafts by Temiar

Sources: Fieldwork (2025)

Figure 7 showcases a variety of handmade woven items produced by Temiar craftspeople, including pouches, mats, bags, and multipurpose containers. These crafts reflect the community's rich weaving traditions and are often sold to visitors. The use of natural materials such as bertam and rattan, combined with vibrant patterns, highlights cultural identity and sustainable craftsmanship. These artisanal products contribute to local income generation and play an essential role in heritage preservation.



Figure 8: Traditional Food Stall at Pos Kuala Mu

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

Figure 8 features a locally operated food stall at Pos Kuala Mu, offering a variety of traditional dishes and beverages that reflect the food heritage of the Orang Asli community. Among the menu items are nasi buluh (bamboo rice), ikan tengas (copper mahseer), forest-sourced vegetables, and a selection of herbal drinks known for their health benefits. These offerings enhance the visitor experience and support local entrepreneurship and cultural preservation through traditional local Temiar food.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings reveal that Temiar architectural practices are deeply rooted in ecological wisdom, cultural continuity, and community beliefs, which are enthusiastically expressed through the construction and operation of traditional-style chalets. Tourism has emerged as an economic opportunity and a platform for cultural preservation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and community empowerment. Using natural materials in design processes and sustained engagement with traditional building techniques reflect the community's commitment to maintain their heritage while adapting to contemporary demands.

Moreover, tourism initiatives have generated employment, encouraged entrepreneurship, and reinforced the cultural identity of the Temiar people for outside visitors. This study underscores the importance of culturally responsive tourism planning that respects indigenous spatial knowledge and promotes sustainable development. Future research may expand on comparative studies across Orang Asli communities or explore long-term impacts of tourism on cultural resilience and architectural adaptation.

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