Exotic Dancing
Performing Tribal and Regional Identities in East Malaysia’s Cultural Villages

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Headhunter in Spandex

The high point of the tourist show at East Malaysia’s Sarawak Cultural Village is a number called Kanjet Ngeleput (fig. 1). Originally a male warrior dance from Sarawak’s Orang Ulu tribe depicting stalking and hunting, this version of Kanjet Ngeleput has been revamped to include a blowpipe demonstration with audience participation. The dance is performed low to the ground, with slow, graceful, twisting movements representing the careful hunt for prey, to the accompaniment of the plucked stringed instrument called the sape. Orang Ulu were formerly headhunters, and the dancer at Sarawak Cultural Village playfully acts out the role of the fierce savage; in performing stereotyped motifs of primitivism and eroticism, this “savage” at once confirms and satirizes them. After checking over the audience, he drags a tourist (in one of the...
performances I attended, a young woman wearing cutoff jeans and heels)—his “victim”—onstage. In his skimpy costume, black spandex shorts covering what would in the village be nakedness, he circles his victim (in her equally abbreviated costume), sizing her up . . . as what? Food? Sex partner? Continuing to toy with sexual innuendo, the performer persuades the tourist to take his blowpipe and shoot a dart into a balloon, amid laughter and applause. The dancer then drops his “native” character and takes a bow with his victim. This piece, with its mini-narrative of a close yet safe encounter with a dangerous (yet sexy) native, simultaneously reconstructs and defuses Sarawak’s best-known tourist image, that of the headhunter, reanimating a familiar stereotype to make it appeal to new domestic, regional, and Western tourist markets.

In the contact zones created in Southeast Asia’s cultural and tourist centers, state, tribal, religious, and commercial interests all vie to represent local cultures to residents and tourists. The resulting, sometimes startling, productions exhibit many of the same techniques of borrowing, culling, and reinvention on a local level as other types of intercultural performance do. Far from homogenized products, these examples of “showbiz ethnography” (Trimillos 2003) contain coded statements about issues of cultural ownership, image, tribal relations to the state, and the state’s relation to modernity and postmodernity (see for example Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Bruner 2005). As the pace of both globalization and resistances to it accelerates, tourist productions continue to grow more and more complex and to address increasingly diverse audiences.

**Heritainment**

Tourist shows are multifaceted phenomena fulfilling myriad functions through their subjects, performance styles, and formats. These functions include: showcasing one or several cultures; entertaining tourists; constructing messages of regional and national identities; providing experiential opportunities for tourists; and creating a capstone to the tourist experience and a narrative structure for a visit often just completed. Such shows might be termed “heritainment,” exhibiting authentic-seeming cultural forms while entertaining and imparting easily recalled images and narratives. Tourist shows at three cultural villages in the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah “theatre up” their cultures, yet each displays a different attitude toward theatricalization, from open acknowledgement, to attempts to minimize or even deny it: Sarawak Cultural Village, a quasi-governmental and highly successful “living museum” founded by the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation; Monsopiad Cultural Village, a privately operated and funded site outside of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah; and Bavanggazo

1. I have used the word native in two ways: without quotation marks to denote a member of an indigenous ethnic group; and with quotation marks to mark those times when they are playing the role of a native in a more theatrical situation.

2. Visits were conducted between February 2005 and July 2006, with funding from the Mellon Foundation and the Christian Johnson Foundation. A portion of this paper was delivered at the Faculty Lecture Series at Hamilton College.

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Longhouse, a modest operation started and operated by villagers near the northern tip of Borneo, also in Sabah.2

Tourist shows take place in many different spaces, from hotel lobbies to restaurants to specially constructed, sophisticated theatres to open areas. In these spaces, tourists from various local, domestic, regional, and foreign cultures gather together as a temporary “public”—and sometimes participate in—shows performed by members of an exotic culture or ethnic group. The shows are just long enough to present a variety of dances and/or musical numbers, along with one or two other special skills. The overall structure compares to a musical revue, with a narrator introducing each “act” and a number of particular note (similar to a “novelty act” in a revue) ending the show.3 Frequently, better-funded productions or those with governmental sponsorship adapt techniques of Western professional theatre, utilizing stage technology and performance conventions. Examples include stage lighting designs with multiple cues, amplified sound, uniquely designed scenery, onstage video, performers hidden offstage until their entrances, and special costumes adapted from traditional clothing. Aside from these general characteristics, the structure of cultural shows varies greatly, following expectations of the audiences for whom the pieces have been created; the artistic, administrative, and commercial goals of the creators; and, the intended functions of the show.

Exhibiting cultures through performance is not of course a new phenomenon: contemporary tourist shows bear similarities to performances at international expositions such as the Columbian Exposition (1893), the St. Louis World’s Fair (1904), and the 1931 Exposition Coloniale in Paris where Antonin Artaud famously encountered Balinese dance. Both imported and in situ cultural shows arise from the spectator’s desire to encounter (and understand) an exotic culture through the display of traditional dance and theatre. However, there are also important differences between the two. Showcasing a culture in its native setting adds additional layers of meaning and accountability: the number and types of audiences at the event multiply, from local audiences who are in a position to judge the authenticity and skillfulness of the performance, to sponsoring governmental agencies who must ensure that their own agendas are advanced, to friends and members of the performer’s ethnic group or village. While the primary audience at contemporary cultural shows still comprises tourists who have traveled to the site to encounter an exotic culture, these additional, local audiences also exert a good deal of influence on both the content and the performance style. Performing a cultural show in situ is equally as complex as performing it in another culture: it must address a wide variety of spectators (from both home and abroad), with different concerns, agendas, and ways of apprehending performance.

Sarawak Cultural Village

Over the past 15 years, cultural villages have proliferated in Malaysia, with 15 such destinations already in operation by 2002 (Dellios 2002). Prime among them is the Sarawak Cultural Village (SCV), founded in 1990 and described as follows on the organization’s comprehensive website: “This living museum depicts the heritage of the major racial groups in Sarawak and conveniently portrays the respective lifestyle amidst 14 acres of equatorial vegetation” (SCV 2005). Total attendance at SCV in 2006 was 104,692 visitors: 40,526 Sarawakians and 64,166 non-Sarawakian Malaysians and foreign guests, or about 63 percent from out of the state. This is down somewhat from 2004’s all-time high of 119,960 (Zainuddin 2007). Admission to SCV is RM60, approximately US$18.40.

3. I am following Michael Warner’s use of the term “publics” (2002).
4. This form is similar to what I Made Bandem has described as the “composite genre” that evolved in Balinese tourist shows (Bandem 1995:128). The recital type of presentation—according to Bandem called prembon—was first presented at the Bali Beach Hotel and is especially favored for presentations featuring the village children.
SCV has deep ties to the Sarawak state government. The site was constructed with funds from the Sarawak Economic Development Corporation, which still lists it as an asset (SEDC 2000). State agencies such as the Sarawak Tourism Board (STB) and its parent organization the Ministry of Urban Development and Tourism provide annual support for events including the Rainforest Music Festival and the World Harvest Festival. Given these extensive ties, it is not surprising that SCV’s programming reflects and promotes regional and national agendas. SCV actually does a good deal more than merely depicting heritage, ultimately mediating among local, national, and global cultures and identities—simultaneously occupying different points on an imaginary sliding scale that runs between cultural preservation and calculated interculturalism.5

The 17-acre cultural village is located about 45 minutes from Sarawak’s capital city of Kuching (pop. two million) on a peninsula accommodating a number of resorts in a government-designated “tourism zone.” Seven replica houses6 occupy the perimeter of an artificial lake, each containing artifacts and/or actual members of a different ethnic group (fig. 2). In addition to the houses, there is a kiln, crafts house, restaurant, gift house, and fully equipped Western-style proscenium theatre. Incongruously scattered throughout the site are contemporary, abstract stone sculptures by artists from around the world (the result of a government minister’s wife’s interest in sculpture). These accentuate the tensions between contemporary and traditional, global and local that characterize SCV (fig. 3).

**Redoubled Identities**

According to a conversation with General Manager Jane Lian Labang in February 2005, SCV is unique among cultural villages because a significant number of its employees actually live at the site on a full-time basis, lending it (so she feels) the ambience of a “real” village. Approximately 50 members of the seven ethnic groups represented at SCV live in replicas of their respective group’s traditional houses, in quarters set apart from public areas. Every day, these residents don modified traditional clothing and perform aspects of village life for visitors, including bamboo

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5. Cultural villages such as the ones discussed descend from the 19th-century “folk-life museum,” in which costumed natives reenacted aspects of local cultures, including crafts demonstrations, music, and so on (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:38–44). The sites in Malaysia consistently included the following elements: reconstructions of local architecture; the display of artifacts; native foods; gifts for sale; demonstrations of skills such as woodcarving, cooking, and weaving; the opportunity for tourists to try out unfamiliar skills (such as the blowpipe); and cultural shows—all bound together by the theme of the “village.” While each site localizes the template of the cultural village, each also adapts it to reflect extensive connections to the state, region, and international tourism.

6. Designed to reflect the dwellings of the state’s predominant ethnic groups: Bidayuh, Iban, Orang Ulu, Melanau, Penan, Malay, and Chinese.
carving, weaving, playing musical instruments, and cooking, in a complicated display of staged authenticity. Visitors are “supposed” to believe that real villagers inhabit SCV, doing what they do every day (weaving, cooking, etc.), and unlike at historical recreations (such as Colonial Williamsburg in the US), this is in a sense true. SCV’s performers are in fact who they portray themselves to be: Ibans pursuing supposedly Iban activities and so on. Whereas at historical recreations such as Williamsburg the way of life being displayed is extinct, it is not necessarily exotic in that it is related to the culture of the majority of its audience (US citizens); conversely, SCV displays a way of life that is not yet extinct but is distinctly exotic to its many foreign visitors. SCV’s inhabitants, unlike the actors at historical sites, are not “re-creating” a way of life but replicating one that exists in less-accessible places, displaying a way of life that might not otherwise be visible to tourists. SCV distills “traditional life” in three ways: activity (by selecting activities on the basis of how “traditional” they seem); place (by gathering together many different ethnic groups); and, temporal context (by exhibiting practices seen only on special occasions as well as those of everyday village life) (fig. 4).

Apart from the fact of ethnicity, however, the role of “traditional native” (as opposed to “modern native”) is partially invented: the workers are actors in costumes, performing roles of the natives they happen to be in order to render contact between tourist and native more predictable and delimited. While the intended impression may be of an unmediated encounter, it is in reality a highly staged interaction, heightened by theatrical elements such as costumes, props, and a “living” set. The whole performance is controlled by producers in terms of casting, hours of availability and, of course, wages. While impromptu conversations with the “actors” about topics other than their heritage activities are not exactly discouraged, they tend to be limited, whether conducted in English or Bahasa Malaysia.

In exchange for employment, workers keep their everyday lives (as “modern natives”) largely out of sight, replacing them with alternative versions more closely approximating the expectations of tourists. While no less native (or authentic), employees’ offstage identities are not what tourists have paid to see, as they are not consistently “traditional.” Employees with whom I spoke were matter-of-fact about these dual identities: they were happy to display skills which, while largely discarded in their urban lives, were frequently part of their upbringing and are a part of their ethnic group’s heritage. While native both on and offstage, they are fully “traditional” only during working hours.

Theatricality is rife at SCV, yet firmly controlled. SCV’s producers keep their employees’ offstage lives almost totally out of sight. Even as an overnight guest on the “homestay experience” at the Bidayuh longhouse I saw few flaws in the theatrical facade. During my scheduled free time, after the dance lesson and before dinner, I wandered around the site and caught a glimpse of the less-scripted life at the village—one of the performers jogging around the lake, a

Figure 3. Abstract stone sculpture at Sarawak Cultural Village, 2005. (Photo by Craig T. Latrell)

7. Performing as a live display bears more resemblance to performing in a ritual than a scripted performance—the only impersonation involved is self-impersonation.
wood-carver in his street clothes putting away his tools, and children riding bikes and in-line skating around the lake. Native costumes were replaced by the same clothes nonemployees wear, mostly jeans and T-shirts. Even so, my homestay experience was strictly controlled: I never saw the family’s living quarters or spent time with anyone but the eldest male, who fulfilled his institutional responsibility by talking to me (in English) about the background of the Bidayuh tribe and the various uses the tribe makes of bamboo. Even at its least scripted, the SCV experience is still firmly in the hands of the producers.

Live displays constitute a strange, self-referential sort of theatre, transforming residents into signs of themselves. In this case, residents become “tribal people,” metamorphosed into characters in a play about life in Sarawak. Theatricizing an activity (through its context and/or through the performance of “restored behaviors” [Schechner 1985:35–116]) alters its meaning, emphasizing “doing in order to express something” rather than to accomplish something; i.e., instead of weaving or cooking in order to produce clothing or food, “Sarawak culture” is performed. Instead of individuals, local people become generic representatives of their cultures—participants in a production designed to reconfirm tourist preconceptions of Sarawakians as primitive, simple, and close to the land. This (and indeed, all of the performances at these sites) is an example of what Richard Schechner calls “showing doing [. . .;] pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing” (2002:22).

Since the creation of any performance necessarily involves selectivity, “theatre-ing up” a culture inevitably essentializes it, “imprisoning reality” in the same way Susan Sontag believed photographs do (1983:356). It allows a stripped-down, simplified version of a culture to stand in for the more complex and contradictory actuality, encouraging the observer to believe that he or she “gets it”—a sort of perceptual souvenir. Such a point of view maintains both otherness and distance, leading spectators to the conclusion that unfamiliar cultures are simply less real (and more entertaining) than their own. It also gives the impression that people spend most of their lives pursuing interesting cultural activities. The reality, as Uni Wikan said in Managing Turbulent Hearts, is that “the idiom of drama or theatricality captures only one facet of the pattern of life” (1990:xxi).

The Show

Within this already theatrical context, SCV’s cultural show has an important place as the most blatantly theatricalized activity and is clearly meant to be experienced as the visitor’s final stop. It takes place at 11:00 AM and 4:00 PM in the fully equipped, comfortable theatre (fig. 5) adjacent to the restaurant. Instead of utilizing a replica structure of a longhouse (which includes a common

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area where village performances are presented), SCV’s theatre incorporates a fixed stage, with a group of musicians arrayed in front of a gaudily painted jungle backdrop. Decorative spears and tassels adorn the sides of the stage and a red velour curtain hangs above. This physical setting makes no pretense of replicating village conditions, instead openly recontextualizing performances and adopting Western stage techniques in order to make visitors feel more comfortable and disconnect the dances from any sort of ritual significance. SCV’s website describes the show as follows:

The air-conditioned mini-theatre is where the Sarawak Cultural Village’s award-winning dancers and musicians present their famous multicultural performances. Spectacular costumes and elegant dance routines provide an entertaining and enjoyable introduction to Sarawak’s ethnic groups and their cultures. Our dance troupe brings fame to the land, creating awes and gasps from Australia to the Americas and across the globe (SCV 2008).

The show is presented by a troupe of 48 permanent and contract professional dancers under the direction of a choreographer. Dancers are hired through auditions regularly conducted in Kuching and surrounding towns and villages. The candidates need not have prior training or professional experience, although many do. After being hired, dancers spend several months in training before taking their place as full members of the company or as members of a touring show. Those accepted as full company members can remain with the troupe as long as they are still physically able to perform—and even after they can no longer dance, they may remain employed at SCV either as crafts demonstrators or in administrative positions. Full company members achieve a financial and social stability almost unheard of for dancers in the US. The awards referred to on the website include the prestigious government-sponsored National...
Dance Festival Award (Festival Tari Kebangsaan) in 1994 and 1996. According to critic Mohd. Anis Md Nor, the success of SCV’s dance troupe at the Festival led other groups to begin to perform their own local dances. SCV’s dancers have toured numerous times over the past 18 years, to Australia, Europe, the Middle East, Canada, the United States, and Asia.

The themes of the show, stated repeatedly and explicitly through words and choreography, are the diversity of Sarawak’s culture, Sarawak’s relation to Malaysia as a nation, and Malaysia’s role as an international tourist destination. The show functions at four levels: local or tribal, state, national, and global, and is constructed to satisfy distinct—and sometimes competing—audiences, balancing local and global concerns.

After a musical introduction, a master of ceremonies welcomes audience members to Sarawak and to the Cultural Village and proceeds to introduce dances from individual ethnic groups, one dance from each of seven groups. Of the 28 ethnic groups in Sarawak, seven are featured in the SCV show: the Bidayuh, Iban, Melanau, Orang Ulu, Malay, Penan, and Chinese, which together comprise the majority of the population. Some ethnic groups (Kenyah, Kayan, Kelabit) are included as subgroups of the Orang Ulu, while others such as Indians or the smaller tribes are not referred to in any way. The show both defines and displays Sarawak’s ethnic diversity, incorporating some groups while omitting others, thus reflecting one of Sarawak’s (and Malaysia’s) major marketing points: “multi-ethnic tribes living harmoniously with each other,” as the state’s website puts it (STB 2006).

When asked if the cultural show’s dances are authentic, Martina Benedicpaul, one of the choreographers and senior company members, replied carefully that they are “generic” versions of village dances, created after discussion with members of different villages and observation of their performances (fig. 6). Because SCV’s audience members are not just foreign but also local, and because a single dance can vary from village to village (complicating the notion of a sole “authentic” version), SCV’s choreographers have been careful not to offend any particular village or group by performing one village’s version. Just as the show as a whole is a negotiated product, the choreography of the individual dances must also be mediated among different local versions in order to avoid the appearance of favoring any one village within a single ethnic group.

Cultural Ownership and Expediency

The question of cultural ownership naturally arises, along with the implications of the performance of dances by members other than the ethnic group originating the dance. These issues

9. The same groups receive their own replica houses, with actual representatives of the group living in the houses.
10. The issue of ethnic harmony is a sensitive one in Malaysia not just because of the multiplicity of races, but because of historic imbalances in wealth between the Chinese and other groups, and the race riots this imbalance precipitated in the mid to late 1960s.
bear immediate and practical implications for the company. For instance, should the Chinese fan
dance (fig. 7) be performed despite the current lack of Chinese company members? As Michael
Brown says in *Who Owns Native Cultures*, in many places “culture and such related concepts as
‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ have become resources that groups own and defend from competing
interests” (2003:4). Yet at SCV, neither administration nor company members seem to view
cultural ownership as a serious concern. According to the dancers, members of the “appropriate”
ethnic group (i.e., the originators of the dance) perform their own dances when possible, but
it is simply not feasible to sustain a company large enough to satisfy such ethnic consistency—
in other words, for an all-Iban group to perform the Iban dance, and so forth. One of the
organization’s senior administrators and musicians, Leo Stanly Marxpison, told me that com-
pany members accept that their ethnic group’s dances will be performed by a mixed group but
still believe that their version of the dance is the best. In other words, a tourist show is not held
to the same standards as a village performance. In response to the same question, Benedicpaul
replied that the dancers must learn to share Sarawak culture among themselves, and for that
reason must learn dances from all ethnic groups, echoing the message of “unity in diversity.”

The equanimity with which the issue of cultural ownership is regarded at SCV points out just
how contested the concept itself is: in this case at least, ownership is most usefully examined not
as a resource to be owned and defended, but as contextual and multiple. Dances are not the
exclusive property of a single group but also belong to the state and, by extension, to SCV.
The solution of multiple ownership satisfies all parties, who agree that ownership of the dances
depends on the performance context and that a tourist show fulfills different functions than a
village performance. As for audiences confronted with a stageful of Iban, Malay, and Orang Ulu

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11. The notion of “unity in diversity” is found in a number of Southeast Asian countries. In fact, Indonesia’s national
motto is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which is usually translated as “unity in diversity.”
women performing the Chinese fan dance, issues of appropriate ethnicity and cultural ownership do not even seem to register. The dance, rather than the ethnicity of the performers, draws the audience’s focus.

**Malaysia Truly Asia**

As described in the opening of this paper, the dance *Kanjet Ngeleput*, with its blowpipe-wielding headhunter and cheerful sexual innuendo, serves as the emotional climax of the show. It creates an easily remembered narrative for audiences to take away—a souvenir of memory—and seems designed to appeal equally to tourists from West Malaysia who might not be familiar with geographically distant Sarawak and to international tourists. By contrast, the show’s finale, which is at once outlandish and complicated, is clearly directed foremost at foreigners, both Western and Asian. The Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board’s current marketing campaign is “Malaysia Truly Asia,” expressing the sentiment that all of Asia’s “great cultures” coexist in a “potpourri” in Malaysia, making it an “incomparable Asian feast for the senses” (Malaysia Truly Asia 2006). The final dance is a theatrical expression of that slogan in the idiom of a television or casino variety-show number. It features a preexisting song (entitled “Malaysia Truly Asia” and apparently originating from the tourism board), lip-synching, and a display of all seven ethnic groups simultaneously in the full glory of faux-ethnic costumes.

This piece serves several functions at once: it incorporates a few movements from the preceding dances, in a summation of ethnicity; it adds generic, TV–inspired choreography for popular appeal and to demonstrate trendiness; and finally, it conveys a nationalistic message about the role of Malaysia in Asia while positioning the diversity of Sarawak within the larger framework of Malaysia’s diversity—one potpourri within another. The performance of this number constitutes the broadest level of negotiation—between the SCV cultural show (and by extension, all of SCV) and Malaysia’s national identity. “Malaysia Truly Asia” ties together local, national, and global tourist cultures and provides the audience with an overall narrative of what they have seen, both in the show and at SCV as a whole, by “zooming out” to take in the larger picture of Malaysia as a global tourist destination.

Yet the dancers perform “Malaysia Truly Asia” in a noticeably different style, going through the choreography by rote as if to signal to the audience their lack of commitment to the number. Movements were neither crisp nor finished, and the performers’ unsmiling expressions underscored their indifference. Nor was this just a single uninspired performance: subsequent shows exhibited the same lackadaisical attitude. Perhaps the unenthusiastic rendition reflects the fact that, according to one of the troupe’s members, this number was imposed by the Sarawak Tourism Board in order to present a consistent image of Malaysia to international tourists. Indeed, an almost identical number (with the same lip-synched music and similar choreography) closes the cultural show at the Malaysia Tourism Center in Kuala Lumpur, although different choreographers are credited.

“Malaysia Truly Asia” illustrates how complicated the question of cultural representation is. Although the number is clearly a work of marketing by a government agency, the addition of a choreographer, director, performers, musicians, and other theatrical elements opens up the possibility for interpretation by any one of the collaborators. As any theatre practitioner knows, it is easy to subvert the meaning of a performance through the addition of a subtext. Some of the performers in “Malaysia Truly Asia” seem to be doing exactly this, in a subtle demonstration of resistance to an imposed number and its attendant agenda. Whereas the other numbers also market Sarawak’s culture, they are more direct adaptations of local dances, while “Malaysia Truly Asia” has little to do with local culture. The strategy of multiple ownership meets with no

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12. Perhaps a response to Singapore’s “Uniquely Singapore” marketing and tourism campaign.
13. The same song plays when placed on hold while calling Malaysia Airlines.
resistance as long as all owners are Sarawakian. However, SCV’s dancers may draw the line at selling their culture through a government-devised vehicle clearly designed to elevate the national over the local.

The cultural show uses familiar theatrical devices (lights, music, narrator, video, generic choreography, a climactic production number at the end) to heighten the overall theatricality of the event, with the result that dances become “numbers” that blend together. In other words, the “tainment” part of “heritainment” is stressed at SCV, and the soothing familiarity of the medium of presentation makes the dances seem less foreign and more accessible to tourists. The show is simply structured and easily apprehended: one dance per ethnicity, one audience “hook” (fans, pole climbing, blowpipe) per dance. As Edward M. Bruner notes of a tourist performance in Africa, the emphasis on theatrical techniques “detaches culture from tribe” (2005:82), flattening out differences among ethnic groups and creating a seamless version of Sarawak’s complex culture. The savvy use of theatre, one of the roots of SCV’s success, sets it apart from the region’s other cultural villages, where the lack of theatrical polish renders cultural activities less familiar-seeming, less consumer-friendly, and ultimately more complicated for the spectator.

SCV applies theatrical techniques to local cultures efficiently and unapologetically, while keeping invisible anything that might interfere with this alternative, more marketable version of Sarawak. In addition to the cultural show, SCV also produces deliberately intercultural events, mediating between the cultures of Sarawak, the perceived national identity, and global touristic culture. These programs include the annual Rainforest World Music Festival, at which musicians from around the world congregate, jam with local musicians in afternoon workshops, and perform at an evening concert. Like SCV’s other offerings, the festival is strictly organized, and interactions between local and visiting musicians appear to be spontaneous and informal yet are highly structured. The subject of a segment on National Public Radio, this event is hugely popular, attracting world music groups from around the globe and over 20,000 attendees (NPR 2005). Another ambitious new program is the Ethnic Music Adventure Camp (created by Singaporean producer Malcolm Chen), which includes lessons on ethnic musical instruments as well as a jungle trek during which participants craft instruments out of indigenous plants and objects, culminating in an evening jam session. The event thus combines ecotourism and culture. In an interview, General Manager Labang stated that the next project will be the founding of an arts academy to insure that traditional dance and music continue to be taught.

These diverse activities present heritage as a “value-added” industry, adding new worth to existing assets (e.g., ethnic music or traditional dance) through packaging (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblet 1998:150–52). More importantly, activities like these stake out SCV’s territory as an active agent of interculturalism. In taking control of at least a few ways that foreigners borrow Sarawak dance and music, SCV both embraces and capitalizes on such interactions, positioning itself as Sarawak’s cultural gatekeeper.

Monsopiad Reprimand

At first glance, Monsopiad Cultural Village (MCV) resembles a smaller version of Sarawak Cultural Village (replica houses, gift shop, cultural show, etc.). A closer look, however, reveals Monsopiad’s very different attitude toward and use of the techniques of theatricality. While Monsopiad also “theatres up” its culture, the degree and kinds of performance in evidence are very different from those at SCV. After entering Monsopiad through a gate—less grand than SCV’s gate—and paying an admission fee (RM65 for international guests and RM45 for Malaysians, approximately US$20 and US$13.80 respectively), visitors move to a small café area with comfortable rattan furniture. There, they may enjoy a small, frosted bamboo cup of rice wine while perusing the guestbook and waiting for their guide. Two women were in charge of this café when I visited, one wearing an adaptation of a traditional costume, the other in jeans and a T-shirt (fig. 8). As I wandered over to the adjacent theatre where musicians were rehearsing (in plain view of visitors), the woman in jeans shooed me away, telling me that I would see
the performance later. It was a confusing moment: aside from the embarrassment of a public scolding, I felt unsure of the woman’s role as well as my own, my befuddlement compounded by her lack of costume. Was she a sort of theatrical bouncer, not an actor in the proceedings yet responsible for preserving the consistency of the presentation? Or was I intended to overlook the lack of costume and assume that she had merely stepped out of her role as hostess and “native” momentarily in order to direct my own performance as visitor?

The contrast with SCV is telling. There, the rehearsal simply would not have been visible to tourists, whereas at Monsopiad the incident amounted to a disconcerting attempt to preserve separation between backstage and onstage activities by someone who was in fact betraying that separation in her own clothing. This inconsistency characterizes Monsopiad’s offerings and creates a (perhaps unintentionally) complicated experience for visitors.

Like SCV, Monsopiad Cultural Village is located within easy reach of a capital city, Kota Kinabalu (pop. 250,000), the capital of Sabah. The site is much smaller than SCV, perhaps five acres in all, and its buildings are more densely packed, with less-manicured landscaping. According to Awad Bajerai, Operations Manager, Monsopiad’s total attendance runs 700 to 800 per month (Bajerai 2007), about a 10th of SCV’s attendance, with 70 percent from outside Sabah, roughly the same proportion as SCV’s population of non-Sarawakians and foreigners. Monsopiad was founded in 1996 by descendents of a legendary 18th-century warrior of that name (“built on the very land where Monsopiad lived and roam,” according to the village’s website [MCV 2005]). The organization’s stated mission “is to document, revive and keep alive the culture and tradition, as well as the believes [sic] of the Kadazan people” (MCV 2005) but some SCV administrators hinted darkly that Monsopiad was a copycat village, filching ideas and methods innovated at SCV. The activities offered at Monsopiad reflect less involvement by regional and national governments, less deliberate intercultural experimentation, and a more obvious emphasis on commercial appeal, largely because it is a private enterprise showcasing only one ethnic group rather than seven. The most visible difference between the two places, however, lies in the discrepancy in “professionalism”: the overall impression of SCV’s tourist production is one of smoothness and competence, while Monsopiad’s is rougher and less consistent. In theatrical parlance, SCV has “higher production values” than Monsopiad, yet the latter’s more casual approach has several interesting consequences.

A Deconstructed Tourist Production

As at SCV, Monsopiad’s performers are paid to assume a second identity—that of themselves as tribal people. In those roles, they perform activities deemed significant to or emblematic of traditional life with the goal of manufacturing a simplified version of Kadazan culture to merchandise to tourists. Beyond this, however, the enterprises are quite different. The “live
displays” at SCV are appropriately dressed and limit their activities largely to those the producers assume to have cultural value. The employees, while friendly and willing to talk about what they are doing, are not (at least in my experience) very forthcoming about other topics, although I attempted to strike up conversations in both English and Bahasa Malaysia. Their goal as employee/actors seems to be to further the version of Sarawak culture created at the village and to maintain their performed identities as “tribal people” separate from their nonperformed lives. Underlying the near-invisibility of backstage activities and personalities at SCV is the assumption (by the producers) that a strategy of separation abets the creation of a tourist reality. This tourist reality can be summed up as a monolithic, unchanging, easily digestible version of Sarawakian culture expressive of the government-inspired theme of unity-in-diversity showing Malaysia-as-cultural-potpourri. Little intrudes to mar the illusion of realness, or (in the case of the cultural show) the presentation of theatre and dance as nearly context-free entertainment.

Monsopiad’s experience is less predictable. As with the barista described earlier, performed identities are fluid and the sought-after theatrical reality comes and goes in unexpected ways. For example, some employees and their friends wander around the site dressed in jeans and T-shirts while others wear formal costumes; people both in and out of costume chat on cell phones, smoke, and hang out. On the grounds an impromptu group gathers to watch and laugh at tourists trying their hand at the blowpipe. At the Kadazan replica house, an elderly woman in everyday clothes (rather than the adapted costume one might have expected based on similar SCV ethnographic displays) strums a stringed instrument called the sundatang. The replica house itself looks lived in, with plastic bottles strewn about, a bare mattress in the bedroom, and three men (one in costume) sitting on the back porch drinking coffee and smoking. These and other inconsistencies suggest a more casual, improvised approach to the creation of a tourist reality, perhaps reflecting fewer financial and governmental resources and controls. While less consistently “traditional” than SCV’s employees, Monsopiad’s less-edited approach more closely resembles the everyday (nonworking) lives of its workers.

The idea of front and back regions at tourist sites, articulated by Erving Goffman (1959) and elaborated by Dean MacCannell (1973), has played an influential role in tourism theory. In MacCannell’s construction, tourism represents a quest for a show of authenticity in response to modern alienation, marked by stages in the progress from front to back regions. Recently, Bruner has refuted the idea that there exists a more “real” culture in the back regions, reminding us “there are no originals, that a single real authentic culture does not exist” (2005:93). Yet cultural villages are in fact defined precisely by the deliberate effort to construct a “single real authentic culture” designed to supplant any competing representation, and by distinctions between backstage and onstage behaviors (which correspond to back and front regions). Every act of staging culture necessitates the formation of a new and unique backstage, a third reality distinct from both the elusive “single real authentic culture” and the new, manufactured representation.

The primary function of onstage behaviors in a tourist setting (whether a dance in a cultural show or a Bidayuh woman demonstrating weaving) is to create a representation of a culture, and these efforts are marked by such theatrical devices as costumes, sets, and props, as well as formalized behaviors such as dances and songs. The function of offstage behaviors is to facilitate this creation through such activities as cleaning, cooking, serving, directing, choreograph-

14. “The front is the meeting place of hosts and guests or customers and service persons, and the back is the place where members of the home team retire between performances to relax and to prepare […]” (MacCannell 1973:590).

15. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (following MacCannell) notes when describing what she calls the “drama of the quotidian,” exhibitions such as those at cultural villages “stage the back region,” thereby creating a new front region” (1998:47). She is referring to the staging of such activities as cooking or weaving, previously thought of as back-region activities.
ing, hanging lighting instruments, running sound equipment, controlling crowds, etc.—suppos-
edly not shown to visitors. While one set of behaviors may not be more “authentic” than the
other—any more than what happens at a play is more authentic than what takes place back-
stage—they are fundamentally different, and the distinction is important in describing the kinds
of behaviors undertaken in each case and how, by, and for whom tourist realities are created.
Each of the cultural villages under discussion differs in the visible proportion of backstage and
onstage activities, with this proportion determined by the overall mission and purpose of the
site, training, and supervision.

At Monsopiad there is less separation between quotidian and constructed realities, and what
results is half-constructed tourist realism, the seams fully visible. Everyday activities (chatting,
smoking, etc.) and restored behaviors (weaving, playing musical instruments, harvesting rice
in the traditional manner) are equally on display, with no particular effort on the part of the
performer to foreground one or the other.16 The constructed product and the means of con-
struction are simultaneously present, confronting the visitor with dual versions of Sabahan
culture and raising the question of which version is more “believable”: how can one grant
credibility to a created version of Sabahan culture when it is so ineptly performed? And yet,
how can one say that employees are playing their roles badly when in fact they are playing
“themselves”? If SCV’s residents are transformed by virtue of theatricalization into characters
in a play about “Sarawak culture,” then Monsopiad’s employees are like Brechtian actors, both
creating theatrical realities and pointing to the invented nature of the proceedings, deconstruct-

ing the reality as they create it. Tourists must either ignore incongruous parts of the experience
(jeans, coffee-drinking men, cell phones) in order to preserve the consistency of the constructed
reality, discard it entirely as meaningless, or else create a new manufactured experience that can
accommodate both onstage and backstage elements simultaneously, perhaps the most challeng-
ing (and postmodern) response to the proceedings.

Dancing Unadorned

Monsopiad’s cultural show exhibits a similar half-constructed tourist reality. As described earlier,
SCV’s show employs familiar devices (lights, music, narrator, a flashy production number at the
end) to heighten theatricality, thereby making the dances seem less “foreign” to tourists. At
Monsopiad, the opposite is true: the theatrical interface is less sophisticated, emphasizing the
strangeness of the dances and rendering the show less entertaining. Monsopiad’s show (like
SCV’s) comes at the end of the tour, implying that it is a crowning narrative. Audience members
enter the theatre expecting that they will learn why they came to Monsopiad, and what they are
supposed to take away. These expectations, however, are never fulfilled, and the overall effect is
as jarring and puzzling as other aspects of Monsopiad’s tourist experience; one stop on the tour,
for example, is a room full of human skulls and abstract paintings.

Unlike SCV’s theatre, with its pillow-covered benches with backs, lighting system, walls,
and air conditioning, Monsopiad’s is an open-air structure with a pile of artifacts placed
decoratively at the end of the stage. Pillows are arranged on the floor, and musicians sit in a
gallery running above the stage. Cats roam the space. While SCV’s theatre space strips the
dances of their village context, the informality of Monsopiad’s performing space serves at least
as a token reminder of the dances’ original setting. Monsopiad’s company of performers is much
smaller than SCV’s: according to the guide, the six dancers are young (23 and under), ethnically
Kadazan, and most come from the area and have prior dance experience. While under contract
with Monsopiad, they work only part time, in contrast with the dancers at SCV, whose jobs are
full time and permanent. Several dancers work in other troupes as well.

Unlike SCV’s show, with its master of ceremonies welcoming the guests and offering a bit of
ethnographic information about each number, Monsopiad’s show begins abruptly—no lighting

16. For example, the weaving demonstrator abruptly got up and left her post at the loom to take a cell phone call.
change, musical or spoken introduction, or other signal marks the beginning of the production. Music starts and dancers enter, already performing the first of three numbers, while the guide passes around a guestbook for tourists to sign. The first piece, a Kadazan dance called *Sumazau*, is one of Sabah’s best-known traditional dances, performed at festive and ritual occasions such as plantings and harvests. A popular hip-hop version of the *Sumazau* also exists, by the Sabahan DJ Atama. Sumazau features simple choreography with small steps and birdlike movements of extended arms, with men and women dancing in couples and facing each other in lines. Yet this performance—like the other two numbers—is oddly disengaged. Not only is there no attempt to “sell” the number to the audience, as there was (in all but the final number) at SCV, but Monsopiad’s unsmiling dancers seem indifferent to the presence of an audience. Significantly, no choreographer oversees the Monsopiad show, which may account for its less overtly professional, “performed” feel: dancers learn choreography from each other. Whereas SCV’s offerings (including its cultural show) are carefully designed to appeal to different segments of its audience, such forethought does not seem to have been applied at Monsopiad. Connections between Sabah and the rest of Malaysia, or the rest of the world, are left unexplored.

The last of the three dances is the popular “bamboo dance” called *Magunatip* (also performed at Bavanggazo), in which performers rhythmically strike together lengths of bamboo while dancers jump adroitly between them (fig. 9). As with the *Kanjet Ngeleput* at SCV, male performers at Monsopiad dress in warrior costumes for this number, with feathered headdresses and...
skimpy loincloths augmented with spandex shorts. However, Monsopiad's male dancers do not “act” the part of the dangerous, sexy headhunter as SCV's Orang Ulu do, imposing a secondary (and entertaining) narrative on the dance and playing with stereotyped notions. Instead, they simply concentrate robotically on the dance steps. Monsopiad's cultural show displays few of the Western devices of professionalism so much in evidence at SCV: e.g., narrator, stage lighting, amplification, welcoming smiles from the performers, and ongoing eye contact with audience members. Thus, the performance feels—at least to Western audience members accustomed to these devices—less approachable and more strange. Other segments of the audience might of course respond differently, according to their own backgrounds: local tourists might confirm and validate their own culture through the performance, and visitors from other parts of Malaysia might take from the show a sense that Kadazan culture is different than their own. There is nothing comparable to “Malaysia Truly Asia” at Monsopiad, calculatedly constructing narratives about the diversity of the culture, its place in Malaysia, or Malaysia's appeal as a tourist destination. As heritainment, the overall experience mixes both heritage activities and entertainment techniques, but it does so in arbitrary and contradictory ways that result in a certain open-endedness depending on visitors’ backgrounds.

One might dismiss Monsopiad as an inferior version of SCV, or at least one in need of a heavier-handed administration and stage director. But that would ignore the complicated, deconstructed nature of the experience. While the overall tourist experience at Monsopiad seems discordant to someone expecting a show that is Western or at least geared toward international audiences, it is precisely the unfinished nature of the experience that somehow hints at a greater authenticity than SCV's more contrived production and allows for a greater range of response from different segments of the audience. Whereas SCV's expertly applied theatrical techniques ultimately transform dances into numbers and create a seamless tourist version of Sarawak, Monsopiad's is a multilayered, confusing production. Ultimately, the visitor must assemble a souvenir version of Kadazan culture that depends largely on his or her own theatrical and cultural expectations and background.

Bavanggazo Longhouse

Google the Nose Flute

SCV and, to a lesser extent, Monsopiad strive to give the impression of an unmediated encounter with natives while still maintaining control over the experience. The third site, Bavanggazo Longhouse, comes closest to eliminating mediating tactics altogether, or at least to giving the appearance of doing so. For instance, Bavanggazo’s cultural show ends with a simple yet touching performance by an older woman on the nose flute (mongurali), in which the performer, no further than three feet from onlookers, nods her head, smiles, launches into a song, nods and smiles again, then leaves. The performer’s physical proximity, coupled with the presentation’s simplicity and the soft warbling of the music, imparts an intimacy so palpable that it leaves the impression that one has been a guest of honor at a village gathering rather than a paying customer at a tourist show. It was with surprise and some embarrassment that, after Googling “nose flute” and “Bavanggazo,” I read several other accounts of the same performance describing it in similar terms. For example, the website Virtual Malaysia Magazine describes how “an old woman, her forearms bedecked with brass coils, starts playing on a nose flute. She blows hesitantly, her fingers covering and uncovering the three holes. The sound is haunting yet soothing—music that comes from the heart, to nourish the soul” (Virtual Malaysia Magazine 2007). A blog of a trip to Sabah by a group of young Singaporeans describes the same number as follows: “We were also treated to a local flute instrumental performance […] by this lady named Mangambat. This isn’t like a typical mouth blown flute. [It …] is blown through one’s nose. Examine the picture carefully […]” (KK Trip 2005). Another blog pointed out that “The nose flute performance, known as ‘Mongurali,’ seemed somewhat special as that was my first encounter. In the olden days, the tune from the nose flute meant different ‘love messages’ and it was used to express love between a man and a woman” (Virtual Tourist 2006). In contrast to SCV’s
activities, the mongurali performance does not feel like “displaying doing,” nor do the rest of Banvanggazo’s offerings. Although restored behaviors are as much on display at Bavanggazo as the other two sites, they are the least obviously theatricalized, to the point where it is possible to momentarily forget that one is watching staged activities.

**Niche Sites**

It is Bavanggazo’s achievement that despite hosting a steady stream of tourists it manages to give the impression of being a working village—perhaps because it is one. Banggazo’s inhabitants work as farmers and fishermen while occasionally hosting tourists for extra income, embodying the concept of the value-added attraction. Of the three sites, it is the least separated from daily village life: showcased and everyday activities intermingle. In fact, Bavanggazo does not even label itself a cultural village. The smallest in scale of the three sites, it is strictly a local enterprise, owned by members of the Rungus subgroup of the Kadazan. The operation is located near the northern tip of the island of Borneo, about a four-hour drive from Kota Kinabalu. At the turnoff from the main road to Bavanggazo, a sign reads “One Village One Industry” and, unlike SCV or Monsopiad, no formal gate marks the village’s separation from everyday life. The compound comprises only a longhouse in which villagers live—on a full-time basis, as opposed to the largely commuting workforce at the other two sites; a 10-room simulacrum of a longhouse with tourist amenities; three smaller rental “chalets”; and a large outhouse with Western toilets and showers. In addition, there are replicas of a fish trap and a rice barn (fig. 10).

Sarawak Cultural Village tailors its offerings to appeal to diverse audiences based on place of origin, in order to maximize attendance. Bavanggazo’s offerings, on the other hand, are designed to attract members of a single niche market, the ecotourist. At Bavanggazo, local culture as reified through the cultural village is carefully combined with elements of outside cultures for ecotourists wishing to have a “longhouse experience” alongside villagers. The village’s offerings have been carefully crafted to meet the ecotourist’s basic expectations (according to UNESCO):
minimal ecological impact, a respectful relation to local cultures, and financial benefit for local people (UNEP 2002).

From its inception, numerous guides, tour agencies, and governmental bureaus have participated in the creation and molding of Bavanggazo’s tourist offerings. According to the village’s resident guide, by the early 1990s villagers were fully aware of the commercial potential of tourism, the result of many years of visits by a well-known tourist guide and his clients. In 1992, a group of 14 villagers constructed a special tourist longhouse at the suggestion of the Sabah Tourism Board, with assistance and advice from private tour operators and the Sabah government. Apparently the operation had only limited success in its early years, and both private and public agencies stepped in to provide assistance again from 1996 to 1997. Borneo Eco Tours, the largest and best-established ecotourism agency in Malaysian Borneo, provided the villagers with training in several areas of tourist management. Some of the changes instituted during that time include the creation of a logo and ticket design, redesign of guest rooms and bath facilities to accommodate tourists, and the printing of postcards (Sukau Rainforest Lodge 1996). With the assistance of these outside agencies representing state and commercial interests, the village was able to sift through and incorporate tools and techniques to better position itself to attract ecotourists. Since that time, Bavanggazo’s popularity has grown. Borneo Eco Tours and other agencies offer a variety of day trips and longer excursions for tour groups. Individual tourists also visit, having learned of the site through agencies or websites. The sale of beadwork, postcards, photographs, and other souvenirs provides additional revenue (fig. 11). Bavanggazo prides itself on exemplifying tourism as sustainable development, and tourists contribute substantially to the financial health of the village.

Trafficking in Performance

As previously noted, Bavanggazo reconstitutes the cultural village to conform to the expectations of ecotourists whose tastes, while distinct from those of other tourists, are equally specific. Where in Monsopiad the line between backstage and onstage activities is inconsistent,
Bavanggazo’s producers have tried to obliterate the line entirely. Here, everyday life is the show. At SCV, natives emerge from private quarters in costume and engage in re-created activities, fulfilling secondary performed identities. At Bavanggazo, the natives are always “themselves”—they live in the village and make little effort to keep unperformed aspects of their lives out of sight. They are not employees hired to demonstrate crafts or dance, but villagers who have chosen to display their lives to tourists: in exchange for revenue, they are always “on,” playing the role of native for tourists. There is less overt theatrical underlining of activities, or “displaying doing,” and more actual doing in order to get something done, whether cooking or fishing. What was out of sight at SCV and sporadically sighted at Monsopiad is here in full view (fig. 12). This is the basis of Bavanggazo’s appeal for the ecotourist whose quest is for the unstaged, and it was precisely this quality to which I responded in the nose flute performance. Bavanggazo offers a safe container for tourist fantasies of “going native.” While accommodations are rustic, they still provide a modicum of comfort, and bathrooms are clean and well equipped with showers and pedestal toilets. Visitors can thus play at being villagers without the risks of going too far.

Bavanggazo’s cultural show is consistent with this less-formal theatricality. The performance is intended to give the impression that it was impromptu, and it consists of three dances, all truncated versions of harvest and festival dances. The show takes place in the common, front area of the tourist longhouse (the customary place for ceremonies and performances), in close proximity to the spectator. There were only four dancers: the young male guide, one younger woman, and two older women. The show itself was clearly not choreographed or directed; numbers started and stopped abruptly, and there was no narrator to explain what I was seeing. Musicians and other villagers also sat and watched the dances—or watched me watching the dances. Guests sat on the floor, with virtually no separation between performer and audience. As at Monsopiad, the dancers were not concerned with “putting across” the dances, and merely executed the steps, with numerous missteps and laughter. The first piece, *Mongigol Sumundai* (fig. 13), is performed by the Rungus at formal occasions, for both ritual and entertainment purposes. The male dancer, representing the head of a dragon, led the women, twisting and turning behind him to complete the creature, while their arms made slight flapping movements. The informal performance style acknowledged the audience and surroundings rather than constructing a formal, theatrical reality such as that at SCV or Monsopiad. Bavanggazo’s dancers were not uniformly young and good-looking, and their demeanor lent a very different character to the dances, foregrounding the less stagy nature of the event. The second piece, called *Manaradan* (Ladies’ Dance) was performed by the three women, with a single musician beating out the rhythm on long bamboo pieces. As with the *Mongigol Sumundai*, the dance was simple, the women taking turns dancing between the pieces of bamboo with slow, twisting arm movements.

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19. The title of Nick Stanley’s book *Being Ourselves for You* (1998) comes close to describing the dynamic in effect at Bavanggazo, except that it fails to take into account the changes wrought by performance: a more apt title would be *Being “Ourselves” for You*, the quotation marks connoting the element of acting that comes into play.
movements. Following Manaradan, the three dancers and a few of the village’s children performed a short version of the bamboo dance, *Mengatip-atip*: in contrast with the robotic version of the dance I had seen at Monsopiad, children and onlookers laughed as the bamboo pieces caught the dancers’ legs. Finally, the nose flute performer made her brief appearance.

On the face of it, Bavanggazo’s is the most “authentic” show: there is no formal theatre space, master of ceremonies, stage lights, specially designed costumes, physical distance, set, or even entrances and exits. Dancers are not trained professionals, nor were they chosen primarily on the basis of looks and youth. And yet, this reworking of the cultural show is entirely consistent with Bavanggazo’s roots in ecotourism: a less-mediated proximity to culture is exactly what ecotourists seek, an experience that gives them the illusion that they have happened upon a village performance. Adopting the conventions of professional performance would not only seem out of place at Bavanggazo, but would mar this illusion. Given the participation of consultants in the creation of Bavanggazo-as-ecotourism-destination, one can only assume that the decision to de-emphasize the “-tainment” element of Bavanggazo’s heritainment show is deliberate and part of a larger strategy for creating an experience that feels authentic to its visitors.

Yet, despite the illusion of unmediated experience, this was not a ritual or festival—it was still a cultural show presenting ceremonial dances as “numbers” to a tourist audience. At other sites, the techniques and conventions of theatre (costumes, lights, etc.) acknowledge the manufactured nature of the event and help to set “native” (i.e., natives playing themselves) apart from native. Here, the fully visible backstage activity and deliberately heightened authenticity paradoxically raised awareness that the villagers might rather be pursuing primary activities, such as farming and fishing, than their secondary one, dancing and playing music for tourists in the middle of the day. While the instruments of presentation were the least organized at Bavanggazo, they were nonetheless present, and the cultural show played as important a role in imparting a tourist narrative at Bavanggazo as it did at SCV.
Trafficking in performance has its price, and Bavanggazo’s (con)fusion of backstage and onstage raises complex and troubling issues. At SCV, the straightforward use of performance (with its strict separation of backstage and onstage) transforms natives into characters in a play about Sarawak’s culture, created by administrators and government bodies and received by tourists. Still, residents have the option of keeping their private lives off the stage, restricting performed elements to certain places and hours. At Bavanggazo, despite the more equivocal use of theatre, there is almost no escape: everything is part of the production. In exchange for hosting tourists, Bavanggazo’s residents essentially surrender their privacy and become objects of a voyeuristic tourist gaze. This is not a coproduction: it is the tourists who have the upper hand in the construction of the fiction, with villagers permanently trapped in their secondary roles as tokens of native culture. It is the price paid for inviting the public (or at least ecotourists) to view Sabah’s culture as a theatrical production without crafting the conditions under which it is presented: all aspects of their lives are fodder for the manufacture of tourist versions of Rungus culture.

**Conclusion**

The “dancing native” (as Bruner calls it) combines exotic movement and music, eye-catching costumes, and hints of eroticism, all rolled into one compelling image. Bruner says that “organizing dances for the tourists is a way to make the experience more intrinsically interesting than it would be if they just saw locals standing around” (2005:24), but there are other, deeper reasons for the natural affinity between tourism and cultural shows: this affinity involves the nature of both performance and that of the tourist experience. Shows such as the ones I have described occupy a prime place at their sites, as the crowning example of local culture. It is through the tourist show that a cultural village’s identity—what it believes it is about and its relation to its own culture, its government, and to international tourism—is most clearly articulated. In a sense, these events constitute discrete, heightened contact zones within the larger contact zones of the cultural village, where disparate groups of tourists gather to sort through impressions of other cultures through the medium of performance. Thus, the way each place chooses to present its version of the dancing native both distills and reinforces the position of each site in its culture.

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