



REVIEW ARTICLE

THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE SULTANATE OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM: ITS IMPORTANCE, RICHNESS, AND CHALLENGES IN PROMOTING ITS INCLUSION ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the rich and diverse cultural heritage of Brunei Darussalam, emphasizing its multifaceted legacy across various domains such as architecture, historical landmarks, riverine heritage, lush forests, and traditional agricultural practices, including the cultivation of agarwood and incense. It explores the significance of documenting and compiling a comprehensive dossier to facilitate the country's inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List, underlining the cultural, historical, and environmental value of key sites such as the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque, significant historical graves, and other notable landmarks that embody Brunei's unique identity. Moreover, the article addresses the specific challenges Brunei faces in preparing this dossier, including the intricacies of showcasing the universal value of these sites on a global scale, navigating logistical and financial constraints, and balancing development with conservation. It further discusses the strategic approaches and solutions necessary to overcome these challenges, ensuring that Brunei's rich heritage is recognized and preserved for future generations. Through this process, the article highlights how successful registration can not only enhance the country's global standing but also contribute to sustainable tourism, cultural preservation, and national pride.

KEYWORDS

Brunei, Cultural Heritage, UNESCO, Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque, Historical Landmarks, Riverine Heritage, Agarwood, Preservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Brunei Darussalam, despite its modest size of just 5,765 km², stands as one of the most remarkable nations in Southeast Asia due to its rich cultural heritage and strategic location (Abdullah, 2016). Positioned on the northern coast of Borneo Island, it is surrounded by the South China Sea to the north, while it is bordered by the Malaysian state of Sarawak on the other sides. Brunei, known for its immense wealth from abundant oil and gas reserves, enjoys a high standard of living and a society that benefits from the state's social and economic policies.

The history of Brunei dates back to ancient times, with significant development since the 14th century. Brunei played a crucial role in the region's history through trade with China and influences from Hinduism and Islam. Despite the colonial period, when Brunei was under British protection starting in 1888, the Sultanate managed to preserve its independence and cultural identity. On January 1, 1984, Brunei gained full independence from Britain and has since experienced continuous progress in various sectors.

Under the leadership of its wise government, Brunei has embraced modern social and economic policies that contribute to the well-being of its citizens and residents (Kassim, 2003). These policies reflect the government's commitment to improving the quality of life, providing high living standards, job opportunities, and excellent education. Furthermore, Brunei is a model of cultural and religious diversity, with the majority Malay population coexisting harmoniously with various ethnic and religious minorities, such as Chinese and indigenous communities. This diversity enhances social cohesion and contributes to the nation's stability

and sustainability.

Brunei's cultural heritage, encompassing religious landmarks like the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque, unique riverine heritage, and rich natural environment marked by dense forests, is one of the most exceptional and rare cultural heritages in the region (Lopes and Hasnan, 2021). Preserving this heritage has become a national priority, not only for protecting national identity but also for promoting sustainable cultural tourism.

Given this rich and diverse cultural heritage, Brunei is highly qualified for registration on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Documenting these cultural properties, including religious, historical, environmental, and agricultural landmarks, requires sustained efforts to ensure their sustainability and preservation for future generations.

2. HISTORY AND CULTURE OF BRUNEI

The Sultanate of Brunei stands as a fusion of ancient history and unique cultural heritage. It lies along the northern coast of Borneo Island, covering a small but culturally and historically rich land that makes it a standout destination in Southeast Asia. Despite its limited size, Brunei has always been a symbol of authenticity and heritage, with much of this heritage still alive in its streets, mosques, markets, and buildings that tell stories from distant times (Lopes et al., 2019).

2.1 Prehistoric Period

Brunei's history dates back thousands of years, with early human presence evidenced by the Niah Caves in Sarawak, among the oldest archaeological sites in the region. The archaeological evidence found in these caves dates

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back to around 40,000 years BCE, a testament to early life in a region that became a crossroads for various cultures. Brunei's strategic location in ancient times made it a key point for trading civilizations across the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea.

2.2 Indian and Buddhist Influences

Before the advent of Islam, Brunei was under the influence of Indian and Buddhist civilizations, which spread through maritime trade routes. These influences introduced cultural elements that formed Brunei's early identity. Brunei adopted Indian customs, including religious rituals, architectural styles, and traditional music. Visitors to Brunei today can still experience these influences through ancient sites such as Hindu-style temples and burial sites that bear the marks of cultural exchange between India and Southeast Asia.

2.3 Islam and the Establishment of the Sultanate

In the early 15th century, Brunei underwent a significant cultural and religious transformation when its king embraced Islam, influenced by the growing presence of Arab and Persian Muslim traders. Since then, Brunei began to build its Islamic identity, which directly impacted its architecture, arts, and literature. This transformation is evident in the many mosques built in the Islamic style, such as the Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Mosque in the capital Bandar Seri Begawan.

Additionally, the historic Brunei Port stands as a prominent symbol of Islam's influence in the region. This port, which lies near the historic city, was a major trade hub connecting Muslim traders across the South China Sea. It remains a lasting cultural landmark, symbolizing Islamic trade and its broad cultural impact on the region.

2.4 Indian and Islamic Influences on Bruneian Culture

Notable cultural imprints from the interactions between India and Islam in Brunei include aromatic trees like agarwood, which were imported from India and became integral to religious and daily life rituals (MENON, 2014). These trees were noted by early travelers, both Arab and Western, for their quality and their deep ties to local culture. In Brunei, agarwood continues to hold a prestigious place in local traditions, being used in perfume making and religious ceremonies, further highlighting the ongoing cultural exchange with India and the Islamic world.

2.5 Colonial Interactions with Western Powers

In the modern era, Brunei entered a new phase with the arrival of European colonial powers, particularly the Portuguese, Spanish, and British, who significantly influenced the Sultanate's trajectory. During the 16th century, Brunei faced conflict with the Spanish, who sought to expand their influence in the region. In the late 19th century, Brunei came under British protection, which led to the separation of Brunei from what was once a vast maritime empire.

Despite British colonialism, Brunei managed to retain its Islamic cultural identity and many of its ancient traditions, such as those seen in Islamic celebrations and the preservation of its traditional etiquette. Today, ancient Islamic tombs in Brunei serve as a testament to this enduring heritage, adorned with Islamic inscriptions that blend local and architectural traditions.

2.6 Cultural Heritage in the Modern Era

Today, Brunei remains one of the most successful nations in preserving its cultural heritage. Landmarks such as the Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Mosque, the historic port, and scattered Islamic burial sites all stand as powerful symbols of Bruneian cultural identity. The blend of Indian and Islamic influences in architecture and social traditions makes Brunei a distinct destination not just for its rich history, but also as a vibrant cultural center. Through these heritage sites, visitors and enthusiasts can trace how the past continues to shape the present in Brunei, where the nation remains dedicated to safeguarding this heritage as part of its cultural identity.

3. CULTURAL PROPERTIES QUALIFYING BRUNEI FOR WORLD HERITAGE LISTING

Brunei boasts a wealth of cultural heritage reflecting the unique interplay of Islamic and indigenous traditions, making it a prominent candidate for World Heritage recognition (Mohammad, 2017). Modern technologies, such as 3D modeling, digital photography, and augmented and virtual reality, play a crucial role in documenting and preserving these cultural treasures. Furthermore, ensuring the protection of cultural properties requires a strong legal framework, like Brunei's national cultural heritage laws. This chapter outlines key cultural properties in Brunei and the importance of documenting them, while addressing the challenges that must be overcome to maintain heritage within a sustainable tourism

framework.

A- The Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque: A Symbol of Islamic Architecture in Brunei

The Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque is one of the finest examples of Islamic architecture in Brunei. Utilizing advanced technologies such as 3D modeling and digital photography, this architectural marvel can be thoroughly documented. Virtual and augmented reality technologies provide interactive opportunities for visitors to explore the mosque's intricate designs.

B- Historical Landmarks: Palaces and Royal Tombs

The royal palaces and tombs in Brunei stand as powerful historical monuments that reflect the Sultanate's rich past. By using modern tools like 3D modeling and digital mapping, these sites can be meticulously documented, ensuring their preservation for future generations.

C- Riverine Heritage: Water Villages and the Interaction with the Natural Environment

Kampong Ayer, the water village along the Brunei River, is a unique example of riverine heritage. Dating back over a thousand years, this community represents a lifestyle intimately tied to water. Technologies like digital mapping and augmented reality can offer virtual tours, allowing visitors to explore traditional construction methods and understand the environmental adaptation of the villages.

D- Natural Forests: A Treasure of Biological Diversity

Brunei's forests are among the world's richest natural environments, home to a vast array of unique wildlife. Techniques such as 3D scanning and aerial photography help document these rare ecosystems, providing interactive educational experiences for visitors.

E- Agarwood and Incense Agriculture: Agricultural Heritage and Craft Traditions

The cultivation of agarwood and incense is a significant part of Brunei's agricultural heritage. Modern technologies like digital imaging and 3D modeling can document the cultivation and preparation of this luxury product, preserving traditional crafts for future generations (Thorpe, 1986).

4. NATIONAL LAWS PROTECTING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Brunei Darussalam has established a robust legal framework for the protection of its cultural heritage, with the Cultural Heritage Act of 2002 playing a central role in safeguarding both movable and immovable cultural properties (Zawawi, 2021). This law offers a comprehensive approach, incorporating a variety of mechanisms aimed at preserving the nation's rich cultural assets in line with international standards. One of the key provisions of the Act is the regulation of authorization, permits, and licenses required for any activities related to cultural heritage, such as exploration, excavation, and the trade of cultural goods. These measures ensure that any dealings with heritage items—whether it be for export, import, or transfer of ownership—are carried out legally, with the appropriate documentation and scrutiny.

Additionally, the Act sets strict guidelines for the customs and dealer trade of cultural objects, imposing requirements for registration, inventory, and keeping accurate records of transactions. The law mandates that all cultural heritage assets be listed in official registries, providing a clear and accessible inventory of the nation's cultural treasures. These registries help to prevent illicit trafficking of cultural goods, which the Act addresses through stringent sanctions and provisions for the restitution and return of stolen or unlawfully traded items.

The law also emphasizes the importance of protecting designated areas or goods deemed to be of cultural significance, ensuring they are safeguarded from any unauthorized exploitation. Furthermore, the Act includes provisions for the good faith acquisition of cultural property, which protects individuals or institutions who acquire heritage items without knowledge of their illegal status. On the flip side, it criminalizes theft and illicit traffic, imposing heavy sanctions on those involved in the illegal trade of cultural goods.

The Cultural Heritage Act also addresses the protection and promotion of cultural heritage by supporting initiatives for public education, awareness, and development programs aimed at increasing appreciation for Brunei's cultural assets. In cases where cultural properties are damaged or removed unlawfully, the law provides for restitution, requiring the return of items to their rightful owners or locations. With a clear statute of limitations and the provision for restitution in cases of illicit acquisition,

the Act ensures that cultural heritage protection is a long-term, sustainable effort, reinforcing Brunei's commitment to preserving its identity in the face of global challenges.

In summary, Brunei's cultural heritage protection laws, as encapsulated in the Cultural Heritage Act of 2002, offer a holistic framework that not only safeguards cultural properties but also promotes their development and awareness. By addressing critical issues such as illicit traffic, trade regulation, restitution, and ownership transfer, Brunei ensures the long-term preservation of its invaluable cultural legacy for future generations.

5. PREPARING THE DOSSIER AND CHALLENGES IN WORLD HERITAGE REGISTRATION

Preparing a nomination dossier for the inclusion of cultural and natural sites on UNESCO's World Heritage List is a meticulous and complex process that requires gathering precise information, documenting the heritage sites, and determining their outstanding universal value that justifies international recognition. For Brunei Darussalam, there are several cultural and natural sites deserving of inclusion, but there are a number of challenges the country may face when preparing such a dossier. In this chapter, we will review the essential steps involved in preparing the nomination and the main challenges that may impede the success of this process.

A- Documenting Cultural Diversity and Heritage Significance

The first and perhaps most critical step in preparing a World Heritage nomination is thoroughly documenting the cultural and natural significance of the site. This involves historical research, surveys, and studies that provide evidence of the site's unique value. In Brunei, where cultural diversity and natural heritage are deeply intertwined, this step requires collaboration with historians, archaeologists, and conservation experts to ensure that every facet of the site's heritage is accurately represented.

Additionally, the importance of intangible cultural heritage must be emphasized. Brunei's rich traditions, including its crafts, music, dances, and festivals, represent significant cultural practices that are integral to the identity of the nation. Ensuring these traditions are documented as part of the nomination adds depth to the cultural value of the site.

B- Addressing Conservation and Management Plans

Another key aspect of preparing the nomination dossier is developing comprehensive conservation and management plans for the site. UNESCO places high importance on how sites are managed and preserved over time. A robust plan must demonstrate how the site will be protected from threats such as urbanization, climate change, or over-tourism. In Brunei, which has a relatively small land area, managing the balance between conservation and development presents unique challenges.

For example, the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque in Bandar Seri Begawan is a prime candidate for World Heritage status due to its historical and architectural significance. However, safeguarding such a monument requires careful management to protect it from modern urban developments while ensuring it remains accessible to the public.

C- Meeting UNESCO's Criteria for World Heritage Listing

UNESCO has set out ten criteria that sites must meet to be included on the World Heritage List. These criteria cover a range of factors, including outstanding universal value, rarity, integrity, and authenticity (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Brunei Darussalam. 2020). The dossier must demonstrate how the site satisfies at least one of these criteria. For Brunei's potential World Heritage sites, identifying and articulating their universal value can be challenging, particularly when it comes to proving how these sites are of global importance and not merely of local or national interest.

A significant challenge for Brunei could be demonstrating the global relevance of certain sites (UNESCO World Heritage Centre. 1992). For instance, the country's natural sites, such as Ulu Temburong National Park, are rich in biodiversity but may face difficulties in showcasing how they contribute to the global understanding of environmental conservation compared to more famous sites like the Amazon rainforest.

D- Securing Support and Involvement of Stakeholders

The nomination process requires the active involvement of local communities, government agencies, and international stakeholders. In Brunei, securing broad support for the inclusion of a site on the World Heritage List is vital to ensure the success of the nomination. This involves awareness-raising campaigns, consultations with local communities, and gaining the approval of relevant national authorities.

A critical challenge is balancing the interests of various groups, including those who may benefit from tourism and development activities. For example, some areas of Brunei are at risk of becoming commercialized, which could threaten the integrity of a proposed World Heritage site. Engaging stakeholders in meaningful conversations about the importance of conservation and sustainable tourism is essential for overcoming this challenge (Noorashid and Chin, 2021).

E- Financial and Logistical Considerations

Finally, one of the most practical challenges in preparing a nomination is the financial and logistical aspects. The process of collecting data, conducting research, and organizing a comprehensive dossier can be resource-intensive. For a small nation like Brunei, allocating sufficient funds for these activities can be difficult, particularly when competing with other pressing national priorities.

Moreover, the logistical task of coordinating between various government departments, research institutions, and international partners requires careful planning and clear communication. It is crucial to have a dedicated team that can manage the nomination process from start to finish and ensure all deadlines are met.

6. CONCLUSION

The process of nominating a site for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List is both a challenging and rewarding endeavor that demands meticulous planning, strategic collaboration, and a steadfast commitment. For Brunei Darussalam, this journey offers an unparalleled opportunity to present its rich cultural and natural heritage to the global community. More than five decades after the signing of the UNESCO Convention, it is vital to emphasize that this initiative is not just about preserving individual landmarks, but about showcasing the collective cultural heritage of humanity.

Brunei deserves serious consideration when preparing its dossier for UNESCO registration. The inclusion of Brunei's exceptional cultural assets, such as the Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque and other historically significant sites, would not only place the country in the spotlight of global recognition, but it would also bring long-term benefits. These include fostering sustainable tourism, enhancing heritage conservation efforts, and cultivating national pride. As Brunei moves forward, it must face several challenges, such as aligning various stakeholders, securing adequate resources, and addressing the complexities of conservation and management.

One of the remarkable discoveries in exploring Brunei's cultural landscape is how its cultural diversity and rich traditions are deeply interwoven with the fabric of its national security and prosperity. The country's exceptional cultural heritage serves as a foundation for the peace and stability it enjoys today. In this sense, Brunei's cultural heritage is not merely an asset to be protected—it is an essential part of the nation's identity and social cohesion. The role of culture and heritage in fostering mutual understanding, social harmony, and economic prosperity is one that should be highlighted, as it is a valuable model for the broader international community.

Thus, Brunei's cultural heritage plays a vital role in promoting a shared sense of belonging and contributes to both the well-being of its people and the broader cultural dialogue across the globe. By pursuing UNESCO World Heritage status, Brunei would be taking an important step in recognizing and celebrating this deep cultural legacy while securing it for future generations. The importance of this endeavor cannot be overstated, as it underscores the necessity of preserving our collective cultural heritage, not only for the benefit of Brunei but for the enrichment of humanity as a whole.

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