

Creating Business a Model for *Etak* - Heritage Food Revival Sustainability in Kelantan, Peninsular Malaysia

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“Etak” industry in Kelantan is under threat due to social changes, increased health consciousness and reducing clam supply. In the past, there were many “etak” vendors in Kelantan and “etak” business was a source of income for rural folks, including poor people and single mothers. Nowadays only a few “etak” vendors survive and with the number of consumers dwindling, the future prospect of the business is hanging in the balance. Reviving “etak” business is deemed essential because it does not only provide employment through entrepreneurship but at the same time safeguards local heritage and irretrievable loss of heritage should be avoided. Against this background, three interrelated objectives of this study are to: (i) identify social and economic nature of the industry and existing business model (ii) identify feasibility of the industry, (iii) propose a business model for sustainability of “etak” as food heritage. Investigating the whole value chain of the industry including “etak” vendors and socio-economic factors inherent with the business is important because it does not only provide broad and thick descriptive analysis of the traditional food of Kelantan but also answers pertinent questions related to the competitiveness of the industry and in turn proposes ways of reviving the industry. As far as the literature review is concerned, no socio-economic study has been conducted in Malaysia with regard to “etak”. A case study method, which is a branches of qualitative study will be adopted. This mixed-method approach warrants detailed investigation and questions pertaining to what, how and why related to socio-economic factors of “etak”. In this quantitative study, as many possible “etak” business players and stakeholders will be surveyed. In qualitative method several “etak” vendors, suppliers, customers, experts in food industry, as well as relevant authorities will be approached. The survey will be analysed by

using SPSS and interviews will be transcribed and then analysed using NVIVO. The findings of the proposed study will be instructive, proposing a revival model for reviving the heritage industry.

Key words: *Etak, Business model, Food heritage, Socio-economic, Kelantan.*

Introduction

“Etak” or Asian Clam, scientifically known as *Corbicula Fluminea* thrives in sandy and muddy rivers in the South East Asia region (Zalina Che Manan, 2014). The size and colour of “etak” varies, according to its natural environment. Although there is no exact information as to when Kelantanese people started consuming “etak” and from where such food was introduced into the state, it is believed that the food has been around for more than 100 years. Unlike other rivers in Malaysia, the sandy Kelantan river is a suitable breeding ground for “etak”. Kelantanese “etak” can be easily differentiated from its counterparts from other states due to its colour – bright yellow whereas “etak” from other states are darker and slightly bigger. “Etak” has long been considered as Kelantanese heritage food because it is not widely available in other states in Malaysia, and where it is, it must have been brought by Kelantanese immigrants. There are two ways “etak” is cooked. First, it is either cooked with coconut milk or vegetables and second it is smoked. The latter is much preferred by the Kelantanese. Smoked “etak” preparation involves 3 steps. First, it has to be immersed in fresh water overnight to wash out the mud and sand inside. Second, it is marinated with a mixture of lemon grass, onion and salt for half an hour. Third, it is placed on a mat-like layer made from bamboo strips and smoked using a moderate fire. “Etak” once was a popular snack among the Kelantanese community. Male and female, young and old Kelantanese love eating “etak”. “Etak” stalls that serve smoked “etak” are available along roadsides and markets.

Currently, the number of “etak” traders is unknown as no official requirement for them to register or to get a business license from the local authority exists. “Etak” business is considered a form of informal economy. “Etak” business provides self-employment to local folks especially those who live along the Kelantan River. Once “etak” is cooked, vendors go to their favourite spot along the roadsides, they sit behind of heap of “etak” on a rounded bamboo basket known as a Badang, on top of that, are some coned like shape newspaper wrappers containing “etak”. In Kelantan such a wrapper is called as Klosong. This was a common scenario in the days where “etak” vendors were surrounded by their customers. “Etak” was once a favourite snack amongst the Kelantanese, and their daily life, considered unsophisticated and rural, revolved around “etak”. If one closely scrutinised, the role of “etak” was actually beyond business per se. “Etak” played an important part in the Kelantanese culture as well as developing social relationships and friendship between those in supply chains. For example daily encounters between an “etak” vendor and customers evoked strong bonds

amongst them. The same was evident with those who shared “etak” during spare time, cementing friendships. Many Kelantanese remember the faces of “etak” vendors who once operated business in their villages.

Today, the scenario is quite different. If one travels along the roads near Kelantan River not many “etak” stalls are available. The same situation also happens at markets throughout the state. It is now considered lucky to see one “etak” stall and vendor along the roadside. A quick author observation in Kota Bharu found only two “etak” vendors who also sell drinks and other items. Realising “etak” business is dwindling and under threat, a comprehensive investigation of “etak” and socio-economic factors related is of paramount importance. Failure to do so will mean not only loss of heritage but also failure to document the socio-economic values that revolve around this traditional food industry. Indeed, the background scenario of the industry will provide a platform to revival.

By and large, the Kelantan “etak” industry in particular and other traditional food in Malaysia and elsewhere are generally under threat (Aida Idris, 2012, Marsella, 2005, Tovey, 2009). Many researchers have debated the onslaught of globalisation at length (Aida Idris, 2012; Wang & Hu, 2017). This includes the threat to heritage food and products (Tovey, 2009, Gonzalez & Dawson, 2015). In the case of Kelantan, based on previous studies, globalization has far reaching impacts on small business, with evidence showing that a number of reasons are responsible (Floyd, 1999, Marsella, 2005). The first reason is due to the changing consumption pattern amongst the community as a result of modernisation and development.

Changing consumption habits with an inclination towards Western food such as fast food has exerted considerable pressure on traditional food including “etak”. As a result, the demand for “etak” has been significantly dwindling. Secondly, the declining demand of “etak” is translated into the lesser number of “etak” vendors. Although no formal number of “etak” vendors is available to compare past and present numbers, anecdotal evident is applicable in this context. In the past, one could easily find “etak” traders either along the roadside or in markets throughout Kelantan, nowadays it is considered lucky to find one. “Etak” used to provide self-employment opportunity for the community. Many disadvantaged people in the category of bottom 40, single mother and elderly people are no longer in business as they used to be. Thirdly, there is difficulty in getting fresh supply of “etak” from the Kelantan River due to pollution as well as sand mining activities.

River pollution kills “etak” and sand mining does not only damage the “etak” ecosystem but also at the same time depletes the numbers of “etak”. Due to these problems, some “etak” vendors have sourced and relied for their supply of “etak” outside Kelantan although they need to bear extra costs and supply is becoming increasingly more difficult. Fourthly, the public has a negative perception pertaining “etak” being unsafe to be consumed. The public realise “etak”

is half-cooked, which means the bacteria that live inside “etak” are still active and can cause harmful diseases (Zalina, 2014). Lastly, the younger generation who want to be entrepreneurs do not see “etak” business as promising nor as having future prospect. For them “etak” business does not fit modern life – as dilapidated roadside sheds, lonely business environment, and only a few passing cars who stop and order “etak” is not seen as lucrative. This is direct comparison to the fast food business chains where cars queue to take orders. Young Kelantanese do not see any future in the business even though their parents were involved in the business before them. Once their parents are too old to run the business, none of their children will continue their businesses.

Looking at the social-economic plethora of the current scenario, the prospect of “etak” business is not promising. If nothing is done to revitalise the industry, it is a concern that “etak” business in Kelantan, currently under considerable pressure, will be impossible to sustain. Once the industry is gone, one aspect of Malaysian heritage will be gone and when this happens, it is impossible to bring it back. Realising “etak” business is under threat, a thorough investigation of socio-economic factors pertaining to “etak” business and stakeholders around the business is of timely, urgent and paramount importance. A comprehensive investigation as proposed will provide a deeper insight into and understanding of interrelated factors of this traditional industry. In other words, the proposed study provides a baseline for action. In turn a viable solution can be proposed to regenerate this industry. This might involve a number of strategies including potential opportunity areas for regeneration. Elements of creativity and innovation could come into play. A number of studies in other countries show traditional business can be revitalised and still relevant in the current context if the needs and wants of customers are fulfilled.

As a problem statement for this study, "Etak" industry in Kelantan is under threat due to the onslaught of modernization and economic development over the last four decades. In the past there were many "etak" vendors throughout the state, but at present only a few survive.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (i) To identify the feasibility of “etak” business.
- (ii) To investigate the current value-chains of “etak” business and existing business models.
- (iii) To investigate the competitiveness of the business.
- (iv) To propose a model for “etak” business revival and sustainability.

Methodology

The proposed study will apply a mixed-method research through quantitative and qualitative approaches. The combination of these methods is the most appropriate due to a number of reasons:

- (i) Qualitative method enables the researcher to gather huge data pertaining to the “etak” business environment. It can provide generalizations on demographic data of players and relevant stakeholders. The answers for questions revolved around “etak” business can be answered.
- (ii) Due to the dearth pertaining to socio-economic study of heritage business in Malaysia, in general and in Kelantan in particular, a qualitative approach is deemed relevant. In this respect, the authors found no empirical study for the topic of interest. As a result a detail ed study is deemed to be most appropriate as it answers the how and why questions pertaining to socio-economic factors of “etak” in Kelantan (Yin, 2009; Wathu, Mwanja & Mwinzi, 2017). All traditional information is largely based on anecdotal evidence and no empirical investigation exist.
- (iii) The objectives of the study that measure social phenomenon in a natural context or setting can only be investigated through a qualitative lens. Unlike quantitative study that applies a top-down approach, flexibility of qualitative study, which is grounded on the data in the field, provides rich information from respondents. This bottom up approach of qualitative technique is deemed appropriate because those involved and who have encountered daily activities have full of knowledge about “etak”. The researchers who are not familiar with the industry will gather as much information as possible from respondents because they are the experts in the industry. Their actual involvement in the industry provides indisputable information. Thick and comprehensive data from respondents will provide better understanding about the industry.
- (iv) Qualitative approach is also chosen because in this area of interest there is no pre-defined theoretical model. In this regard, the researchers can choose to relate socio-economic study of “etak” in Kelantan with much openness and inquisitiveness without formulating any clear theses until the researchers go into the field. In this regard, qualitative method is helpful.

Based on the above reasons, qualitative approach is observed to be more appropriate.

In order to capture thick and detailed information pertaining to “etak” vendors, a case study approach as a part of the qualitative method is chosen. In this regard, a score of “etak” vendors (around 10-15 persons) will be selected. The researchers will closely study their daily activities,

ranging from an A to Z of “etak” business supply chains. This also requires the researchers to spend some time with the vendors at the roadsides or in the markets. Experiencing their daily activities will provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the nature of their activities.

As far as quantitative study is concerned, questionnaires will be distributed to players in the industry as well as relevant stakeholders. In addition, the large chunk of data from the qualitative method would come from interviews with the respondents. Interview is a versatile approach in qualitative method due to its ability to gather reliable information. Moreover, the researchers will also use supporting means –observation. Observation has its own advantages. In this study the researchers can observe what stakeholders in this research do, for example observing how “etak” is prepared and how dealers sell “etak” in a natural setting without any intervention from the researchers. Moreover, it also enables the researchers to observe the socio-demographic elements of “etak” buyers and answer questions on their buying pattern and consumption. Pictures during observation can increase the validity of the study. However, in order to manage the research according to the time frame, observation from a case study of a few “etak” vendors is deemed appropriate.

Information from the survey will be analyzed based on descriptive analysis as well as correlation and regression. Furthermore, some higher statistical techniques such as t-test and ANOVA will also be employed. On the other hand, information that is gathered during the interviews will be analyzed according to emerging themes. After each interview, audio-recorded data will be transcribed verbatim and will be categorized according to codes and sub codes. The latest Qualitative Software, NVIVO 10 will be used to facilitate qualitative data analysis. This process is crucial because it allows the researchers to reflect on the findings according to the research questions. Inputs and ideas arising from the prior interview will be used during the follow up interview. This allows the themes of the study to be crystallized. Based on the interviews, the researchers will develop a model which could be used in the subsequent phase of the study – quantitative method.

Expected Output

The expected outputs from this study are as follow:

- (i) Developing a model for heritage food revival – Business Strategy.
- (ii) Introducing a viable model for heritage food revitalization.
- (iii) Better Standard of Quality of Life for Malaysians – both businesses and the public. (This study supports the heritage policy and Malaysian Heritage Act, 2005).

- (iv) Sustaining self-employment and better income for "etak" vendors – especially the Bottom 40 or the bottom of the pyramid including single mothers.
- (v) "Etak" entrepreneurs can anticipate tougher environmental regulations especially regarding activities that cause river pollution and destruction of their natural habitat. This is a pre-emptive move for sustainability.
- (vi) Contribution to the Heritage Policy according to Malaysian Heritage Act, 2005.
- (vii) A model that describes existing “etak” business.
- (viii) A model for reviving the heritage industry of "etak" as traditional food regeneration.

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