

Guided Tours, Cultural Revitalization, and Interpretive Authority in Indigenous Tourism: A Study of the Paiwan Malijeveq Festival in Taiwan

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Abstract: This study investigated community-based guided tours as means of ensuring that tourism development reflects the values and needs of the Indigenous Paiwan community in South Taiwan. Participant observation, social media content analysis, and archival research were carried out to examine the Malijeveq Festival tours and their effects on cultural preservation and community empowerment. The findings revealed that these tours foster respect for tribal culture, stimulate language and cultural revitalization, and enhance tribe members' right and authority to interpret their culture and customs. They highlight the significance of guided tours in promoting sustainable Indigenous tourism and enriching tourist experiences.

Keywords: Community-based tourism, tourism product development, empowerment, Taiwan

1. Background and research purposes

Tourism can empower Indigenous communities, preserving both tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage as well as yielding economic benefits (Ruhanen & Whitford, 2019; Butler, 2021). Scholars have emphasized that Indigenous tourism has evolved beyond its traditional function as a source of income and employment into an avenue through which to strengthen community identity and cultural sovereignty (Butler, 2021). When managed and interpreted by Indigenous people themselves, tourism can support the revitalization of language, the transmission of traditional knowledge, and the affirmation of cultural values across generations. However, the same processes that generate opportunities can also create tensions. As Ruhanen and Whitford (2019) noted, the commodification of Indigenous culture for external audiences may compromise community control, authenticity, and self-determination.

In promoting socioeconomic opportunities, tourism products are therefore expected to align the needs and concerns of Indigenous communities with those of tourists. Yet, when non-Indigenous or non-local operators mediate Indigenous cultural experiences, ensuring respect for community values can be difficult

(Hillmer-Pegram, 2016). Addressing this challenge requires new models of tourism that place Indigenous people at the center of interpretation and management. One such model is the community-based guided tour, which enables local residents to communicate their own stories and meanings directly to visitors. This study was accordingly aimed at exploring the roles of such tours in supporting community-led tourism development that corresponds with Indigenous values and needs.



Figure 1. The ball-spearing ritual in the Paiwan Malijeveq Festival (Photo by author)

The research context lies within the Paiwan Malijeveq Festival hosted by Indigenous Paiwan communities in Tjuabal Village in South Taiwan. Also known as the Five-Year Festival, this quinquennial ancestor-worshipping celebration features archaic taboos and shamanic ceremonies performed alongside Indigenous songs and dances. The Festival reaches its climax on the fifth day when around 40 tribe members form a ceremonial circle and compete to spear a shaman-blessed rattan ball with ceremonial bamboo poles (Figure 1). Its game-like nature and the sheer number of decorated bamboo poles make the ball-spearing ritual a visually captivating and culturally unique event that can appeal to tourists. As tourism initiatives such as community-based guided tours have developed, the Festival has become a key site for exploring how Indigenous communities communicate their heritage to diverse audiences.

2. Methods

This study used multiple sources of data collected through participant observations, social media content analysis, and archival research. Participant observation was conducted during a half-day guided tour of the Malijeveq Festival in Tjuabal Village, Daren Township of Pingtung County. The researcher joined the tour as a visitor and actively took part in activities guided by Paiwan community members. The tour began with a cleansing and blessing ceremony performed by the Paiwan Indigenous guide to welcome guests, followed by a sequence of interpretive and experiential activities designed to reveal different layers of Paiwan cultural practice.

During the half-day program, participants were introduced to ritual taboos and proper etiquette for attending the Malijeveq Festival to learn the importance of respect for sacred spaces and customs. Elders and guides explained the symbolic meanings of the Festival's central rituals, including the act of spearing the ritual rattan ball. The visitors were invited to craft miniature ritual balls as cultural souvenirs, symbolizing their involvement in the ceremony. The tour also included an immersive observation of the ball-spearing rite, through which the participants could sense the spiritual and emotional intensity of the event. In the final stage, the group visited the local chief's house to offer tribute, which is an act meant to symbolically transform participants from tourists into respected guests. The tour concluded with a trip to the community market, where the participants had the opportunity to purchase local food and handicrafts. Overall, the program offered both observational and participatory insights into how the community designs, interprets, and performs events showcasing its cultural heritage.

The social media content analysis was intended to explore how the participants perceived and communicated their festival experiences in online spaces. A total of 28 social media posts were collected from October to November 2023, primarily from Facebook and Instagram. Each post included text, photographs, and/or short videos shared by both Paiwan participants and non-Indigenous visitors. These posts were stimulated largely by a local government authority campaign titled "Share Your Feelings About the Malijeveq Festival and Win a Limited-Edition Towel." This initiative encouraged participants to publicly share reflections and images of the Festival, thereby creating a rich corpus of user-generated narratives that blend personal emotion, cultural observation, and aesthetic appreciation.

Archival data encompassed programs and itineraries of previous guided tours for the Malijeveq Festival, which unfolded the characteristics of each tour and the variations in their duration, price, and thematic focus. Flyers, articles, and news reports concerning the Festival and Indigenous tourism in the region were also reviewed to understand how the event and its guided tours have been represented and promoted in public discourse.

All qualitative data collected from participant observation, social media, and archival sources were triangulated and examined via thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns and meanings. The analytic

procedure followed a two-step coding process. The first step involved the coding of fieldnotes, social media posts, and selected excerpts from archival documents using an open-coding technique (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Segments of text were examined line by line to identify relevant concepts that captured participants' expressions, cultural interpretations, and representations of Indigenous tourism. The second step entailed refining and clustering the initial codes through pattern coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), with a substantial set of codes condensed into a smaller number of categories. This process enabled the identification of overarching themes related to cultural representation, community empowerment, and visitor engagement. Through iterative comparison across different data sources, emergent themes were validated and conceptually integrated, allowing for a nuanced comprehension of how community-based guided tours mediate between cultural continuity and tourism development.

3. Results

3.1 Characteristics of the tours

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of each guided tour. Although they vary in scope, all involve close collaboration with the local community. For the first two tours, the township government employs many Indigenous staff and collaborates with the community development association. The 1.5-hour tour targets casual guests and aims to prevent ignorant tourist behavior, while the two-day version offers a deeper cultural experience, encouraging participants to become cultural observers or advocates of the Paiwan tribe. For the third tour, an external tourism operator specializing in cultural tourism works closely with the Indigenous community to meet tourist and local needs. Collectively, these tourism products form a portfolio of guided tour that features a diverse range of options for tourists.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Paiwan Malijeveq Festival guided tours

Main organizers	Community stakeholders	Dates and duration	Main itinerary items
Township government	-Community development association -Guides (local, trained)	-October 21 & 25 -1.5-hour	-Briefings on taboos and ritual meanings -Village walk-through
	-Community development association -Guides (local key figures) -Community businesses	-October 20–25 -Two-day	-Briefings on taboos and ritual meanings -Themed activity choices
External tour operator	-Guides (Indigenous, from one of the major chief families) -Community businesses	-October 21–25 -One-day or half-day	-Briefings on taboos and ritual meanings -Crafts workshop -Blessing ceremony

Note: The 2023 Malijeveq Festival lasted from October 21st to 25th. The main ball-spearing ritual took place on the 25th. A minor one was held on the 21st.

3.2 Value of the tours to the Indigenous community

The thematic analysis uncovered three interconnected layers of value that reflect the community's successful reclamation of agency over their heritage: respect for the tribe's culture, language and cultural revitalization, and the right and authority to interpret the tribe's culture and customs.

3.2.1 Respect for the tribe's culture

Briefings on taboos and ritual meanings were a common feature of all the guided tours and served as an essential mechanism for preventing visitors from violating sacred restrictions or misinterpreting the ritual. Guides consistently framed the Malijeveq as a sacred ceremony rather than a spectacle, explaining spatial boundaries and the cultural logic behind them. Before approaching the ritual grounds, the guide reminded tourists that "*we are outsiders*" (participant observation notes), asking them to observe restrictions related to menstruation or pregnancy and to maintain a respectful distance. The ritual leaders and the master of ceremonies halted the proceedings until an unauthorized drone (a violation of sacred taboos) was removed. They stressed that the ceremony would not continue until the device was eliminated while simultaneously reminding onlookers not to enter restricted areas or pick up the rattan balls. The guides further clarified that the ten rattan balls are not uniformly "lucky" but carry differentiated meanings and risks, redirecting visitors' attention from excitement to significance.

The social media narratives echoed this process of guided learning and respect. The participants reported that the interpretive guidance helped them avoid "*touching upon taboos*" (social media post #8) and encouraged others to "*respect their traditions and culture*" (social media post #28). Posts such as "*This journey allowed me to understand many ceremonial taboos and rules of the Paiwan Tjuabal community, and also to learn about their many unique characteristics*" (social media post #3) were a recurring theme in several messages. As one participant reflected:

Participating as a tourist in the Tjuabal Village for Paiwan Tribe's Five-Year Festival and its ball-spearling ceremony, I was deeply impressed by the power of unity and the visual impact. [...] This experience taught me to cherish traditional values and helped me better understand the people of this beautiful community, leaving me truly moved. (social media post #20)

Through these interactions and reflections, respect was enacted as both behavior and mindset, cultivating humility and appreciation among the visitors. Collectively, these guided encounters normalized a discourse of reverence and appropriate conduct, reducing misinterpretation and reinforcing the community's ritual sovereignty.

3.2.2 Language and cultural revitalization

Local youths, many of whom were initially unfamiliar with the Malijeveq ritual, were encouraged to participate as guides, providing them with opportunities to expand their knowledge of Paiwan language and culture through training and interactions with visitors. Across the social media narratives and on-site observations, the Festival emerged as a dynamic arena for language revitalization among the Tjuabal community. Revitalization here was not a formalized language program but a living practice interwoven into ritual performance and storytelling.

First, the Malijeveq Festival enabled the ritual to be experienced as a living heritage. The observations revealed that ritual speech, chants, and songs served as vital vehicles of linguistic continuity. Elders often translated and explained sacred terms, alternating between Paiwan and Mandarin language. This bilingual mediation not only sustained meaning but also adapted ancestral expressions for contemporary audiences. As described in one participant's post:

The vuvu (Paiwan term for elder/grandparent) tried to accommodate us by sharing the Malijeveq culture in his less-familiar Mandarin language, and ina (Paiwan term for mother/aunt) said alongside him, "I'll be the interpreter!" to help us understand better. In the vuvu's sharing, I deeply felt their reverence for the spirits, their emphasis on culture, and their unreserved passing down of traditions. (social media post #11)

Second, the Festival facilitated intergenerational apprenticeship and transmission. Through the field observations, this research documented multiple instances wherein elders taught younger guides the linguistic and ritual lexicon, while younger participants rearticulated the elders' explanations in Mandarin for the visitors. This learning process enabled the younger generations to acquire and negotiate their interpretations of tribal knowledge. The tourists, in turn, expressed admiration for these exchanges, as captured in a social media reflection:

During the lunch break, we browsed the posts on the youth community's social media page. [...] We also walked into the exhibition space built by the young tribe members using their living areas, listening to them tell their own stories through their respective ways of interpretation. (social media post #26)

Through such dialogic interactions, the Malijeveq Festival evolved into a site where language learning, cultural pride, and tourism interpretation mutually reinforced one another. The guided tours thus functioned not merely as visitor education tools but also as catalysts of the ongoing revitalization of Paiwan linguistic and cultural heritage.

3.2.3 Right and authority to interpret the tribe's culture and customs

The Indigenous Paiwan community's control over cultural interpretation has historically been challenged by external forces, such as Catholic missionaries, Japanese colonial administrators, and postwar Nationalist government policies (Hunter, 2020). These interventions have disrupted local ritual transmission and introduced competing frameworks for understanding Indigenous practice. As a result, knowledge of Malijeveq (transmitted orally in the Paiwan language) has developed into multiple, partially overlapping interpretations among the three major chief families of the Tjuabal community. Within this context of simultaneous external and internal pluralism, community-based guided tours serve as crucial platforms through which Indigenous actors reassert their right and authority to interpret their own culture.

To begin with, the local guides and visitors explicitly recognized that the authority to interpret tribal culture should rest within the community itself. The field observations and social media reflections alike underscored a strong sentiment of narrative sovereignty that the community, not outsiders, should represent and explain its own traditions. As one guide emphasized, *"Let the community tell its own story"* (participant observation notes). Similar reflections were shared by a local resident:

I married into the Tjuabal community in May last year and slowly started to get to know Tjuabal and the traditional Paiwan culture ... Many details were taught to me by the elders, and that's when I realized a lot of what was written in the media was incorrect. (social media post #10)

These voices affirmed that authentic interpretation emerges from lived experience and intergenerational dialogue rather than external documentation. This rethinking among locals and outsiders was facilitated by the guided tours through the placement of Indigenous voices at the center of storytelling, thereby transforming the tourism encounter into a dialogic space of cultural reclamation.

Moreover, the tour participants observed that interpretive plurality exists within the community itself. One visitor wrote the following: *"During the brief two-day guided tour, listening to the various families' differing interpretations of the community's history and rituals intertwined with one another ...* (social media post #24)" Such diversity reflects the historical complexity of Tjuabal, where ritual authority is shared, albeit unevenly, among three major chief families. A local Paiwan elder provided the explanation below:

Because Chief Chen's family migrated here from Pingtung, the procedures and ritual chants are slightly different. Although the language is similar, we (the Bao family) don't follow their way of doing things. In fact, the Malijeveq that was not interrupted belongs to the Bao family. (participant observation notes)

The guide further emphasized the following:

This Five-Year Festival ritual was presided over by the Bao family because they were the first settlers to arrive here, so it belongs to them ... However, they did not object to the other two families using their own ceremonies, but when it comes to the important part, the Bao family still makes the final decisions.
(participant observation notes)

Through these guided narratives, the visitors were invited to witness the diversity of Indigenous interpretation as well as the process by which hierarchy and legitimacy are publicly articulated and negotiated. Guided tours thus operate as forums for narrative negotiation wherein Indigenous leaders and guides consolidate interpretive authority, mediate internal differences, and reclaim the right to define how their cultural heritage is understood and represented.

4. Conclusion

The guided tours of the Paiwan Malijeveq Festival exemplify how community-based tourism can empower Indigenous communities by harmonizing cultural preservation with visitor engagement. The tour portfolio, comprising both short two-hour experiences and longer immersive two-day itineraries, offers flexible modes of participation while maintaining cultural integrity. The shorter tours provide accessible entry points for visitors to gain basic cultural awareness and ritual etiquette, while the extended programs allow for heightened engagement with local guides and elders, fostering an engaged intercultural dialogue.

Across both formats, the tours collectively embody three interrelated layers of value. By establishing respect for the tribe's culture, they frame ritual encounters as acts of cultural learning rather than spectacle. Through language and cultural revitalization, they afford younger Paiwan members opportunities to acquire and transmit heritage knowledge in living contexts. By reaffirming the community's right and authority to interpret its own customs, they transform tourism from passive consumption into an active process of cultural reclamation.

Together, these dynamics present a best-practice exemplar of tourism product development grounded in the community. When tourism is rooted in community participation and control, it can contribute simultaneously to cultural continuity and the sustainable empowerment of locals.

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