

# ***Kaamatan* Harvest Festival Challenges: A Narrative Review and Directions for Future Research**

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA)  
2024, Vol. 16 (2) pp 14-29  
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UITM Press  
Submit date: 21<sup>st</sup> November 2023  
Accept date: 12<sup>th</sup> June 2024  
Publish date: 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024

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## **Proposed citation:**

Belly, T., Zulkurnain, M. Z., & Ali, Q. S. A. (2024). *Kaamatan harvest festival challenges: A narrative review and directions for future research*. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 16(2), 14-29.

## **Abstract**

The *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival is a significant cultural celebration observed by the Kadazandusun community in the state of Sabah, Malaysia. While the festival is generally well-received and cherished by the community, there have been a few notable issues and challenges associated. Therefore, this narrative review aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the various challenges that the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival encounters. This study's methodology typically involves a narrative and comprehensive examination of existing literature, documents, reports, news, and relevant sources related to the festival and its associated challenges. *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival lies in its ability to present a comprehensive, insightful, and contextualized understanding of the festival's unique issues. By offering a fresh perspective on these challenges, the review can contribute to cultural preservation, community development, and the promotion of sustainable practices surrounding the festival. Implications, limitations, and conclusion are also discussed in this study.

## **Keywords:**

*Kaamatan* Festival, Challenges, Kadazandusun community, Cultural preservation, Sustainable practices

## 1 Introduction

The *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival is a culturally important event celebrated by the indigenous people of Sabah, Malaysia, also called "*Pesta Kaamatan*" or Harvest Festival. This festival is celebrated as to express gratitude for abundant harvests and honor the spirits of the land and ancestors. The festival originated from the Kadazan-Dusun people, the largest indigenous group in Sabah, and is based on their animistic beliefs and agricultural practices centered around rice cultivation (Kai, 2023).

In the past and even now, rice has been and remains the primary food source for the Kadazan-Dusun community. The primary objective of the festival is to rejoice in the plentiful rice harvest, which not only nourishes the community but also signifies prosperity and fertility (Elaine, 2023). Additionally, it serves as an opportunity to offer prayers for a successful harvest in the upcoming year. Over the years, the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival has undergone changes to adapt to the evolving social and cultural environment of Sabah. It has garnered recognition beyond the Kadazan-Dusun community and is presently celebrated by diverse ethnic groups in the region (Herman, 2023).

The festival usually occurs during May and lasts for the entire month. It commences with the *Kaamatan* Queen competition, in which young women from various districts vie for the prestigious title. The official inauguration of the festival takes place on May 30th with a magnificent ceremony known as "Unduk Ngadau," during which the *Kaamatan* Queen is crowned. Throughout the month, a wide array of events and activities are organized, including traditional sports competitions, cultural performances, exhibitions, and beauty pageants. The focal points of the festival are the traditional rituals, such as the Magavau ceremony, where offerings are dedicated to the spirits associated with rice and ancestors.

Throughout this exploration, we will delve into the multifaceted issues the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival confronts, shedding light on their origins and potential impacts. Furthermore, we will discuss the importance of recognizing and addressing these issues to safeguard the festival's authenticity, the well-being of the community, and the rich cultural heritage it represents.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Value of *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival

The *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival is a platform to exhibit the cultural richness of Sabah's indigenous communities. It encourages the preservation of culture, nurtures unity among diverse ethnic groups, and draws tourists worldwide who seek to embrace Sabah's distinctive traditions (Charlie et al., 2021). Presently, the festival has a crucial role in Sabah's cultural identity. It is celebrated with fervor and respect, reinforcing the profound bond between the people, the land, and their agricultural legacy (Estelle, 2017).

The *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival encompasses various cherished values that are held dear by its celebrants. These values are firmly embedded in the cultural and spiritual importance of the festival (Hussin, 2008). Gratitude stands as one of the prominent values associated with the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival (Simok & Simok, 2023). The festival revolves around the act of expressing gratitude for the plentiful harvests and the blessings of the land. It cultivates an awareness of appreciation for the abundance of nature, serving as a reminder for people to be thankful for the nourishment and resources they are provided with (Berinai, 2014).

Another significant value is unity. The *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival acts as a cohesive element, uniting the indigenous communities in Sabah (Barlocco, 2011b). It serves as a platform that brings people together, promoting a sense of camaraderie, unity, and a shared sense of belonging. The festival offers an occasion for diverse ethnic groups to collectively celebrate and honor their cultural heritage (Ishak, 2010).

Moreover, cultural preservation is another fundamental value emphasized during the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival. It underscores the significance of safeguarding cultural traditions, customs, and rituals (Ezra, 2023). The festival serves as a platform for the transmission of cultural knowledge, values, and practices from one generation to the next. Through active participation and promotion of these traditions, the festival plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage of the indigenous communities (Chiong, 2022).

According to Barlocco (2013), spirituality and ancestral reverence is another value exist in *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival. It is intricately connected to spiritual beliefs and practices, which includes rituals and ceremonies that pay homage to the spirits of the land and ancestors. As King (2016) acknowledges this aspect emphasizes the spiritual bond between the people and their surroundings, strengthening the respect for unseen forces and the wisdom of previous generations.

According to Perry (2017), the festival promotes the values of dependability, sharing, and generosity. During the celebration, it is customary for families and communities to unite and extend hospitality to visitors. Through the act of sharing food, traditional delicacies, and cultural performances, a sense of harmony among the community is cultivated, fostering a spirit of generosity.

As Armgm (2023) also noted that the festival holds great importance in affirming and commemorating the cultural identity of the indigenous communities. It serves as a means of pride, enabling individuals to exhibit their traditional clothing, music, dance, and other forms of artistic expression. The festival fosters a sense of belonging and pride in one's cultural heritage. Thus, these values exemplify the profound bond between the people, the land, and their cultural legacy. They contribute to the feelings of belonging, cultural perpetuity, and shared identity that are treasured by those who partake in the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival.

## 2.2 Belief of *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival

The beliefs connected to the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival are intertwined with the spiritual and cultural traditions of the indigenous communities in Sabah. These beliefs have deep roots in the cultural and spiritual heritage of the region's indigenous people. The festival frequently correlates with animistic beliefs, which encompass the notion of spirits residing within natural elements, landscapes, and ancestral realms, was highlighted by Jiffar (2019). It is believed that these spirits play a role in agricultural prosperity and the overall welfare of the community. The festival provides an opportunity to interact with and demonstrate reverence towards these spirits, serving as a means of communication (Kim & Kim, 2018).

As Janowski (2014) points out, there is another belief pertaining to the rice spirit within this festival. A central tenet involves the existence of a rice spirit or deity responsible for overseeing the growth, harvest, and fertility of rice crops. Rituals and offerings are conducted during the festival to honor and seek blessings from the rice spirit, ensuring a prosperous harvest and future abundance. Further, Aniah (2014) agreed that ancestral worship holds significant importance within the festival's context. The festival pays homage to the ancestors, who are esteemed for their wisdom and guidance. It is believed that the ancestors continue to safeguard and bestow blessings upon their descendants. Rituals and ceremonies are performed to express respect and seek the blessings of the ancestors throughout the festival.

Despite these beliefs, there are also connection to nature associated with the festivals, a considerable number of which are carried by those who partake in the celebration (Aguilar-Luzón et al., 2020). The event accentuates the profound bond between individuals and the surrounding natural environment. It is widely believed that nature offers nourishment and holds a significant position in the community's welfare. The festival underscores the harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world, emphasizing the importance of conscientious stewardship of the land (Stefon et al., 2023).

Besides, the festival embodies the cyclic pattern of existence, specifically within the realm of agriculture. It serves as a representation of the journey involved in planting, nurturing, and reaping crops, symbolizing the continuous cycle of life, growth, and rejuvenation. The festivities emphasize the belief in the interconnectedness of all living entities and the perpetual regeneration of life (Alexander, 2020). Some researchers Neha (2023), have also cautioned the consideration of the concept of spiritual balance and harmony should be regarded as integral aspects of this belief. The celebration promotes the notion of upholding spiritual equilibrium and harmony. It is believed that by engaging in rituals and adhering to cultural customs during the festival, harmony is restored between the spiritual and physical dimensions, resulting in blessings, prosperity, and overall well-being.

### **3 Methodology**

Narrative reviews aim to provide a comprehensive and descriptive overview of a particular topic, in this case, the issues faced by the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival. The first step is to conduct a thorough literature search to identify relevant sources related to the “*Kaamatan* Harvest Festival”. This includes academic articles, books, reports, newspaper articles, and any other materials that discuss the festival and its issues. Online databases and library resources are commonly used for this purpose.

Next is inclusion and exclusion criteria. The researcher establishes criteria for including or excluding sources in the review. In this study, only academic articles published within a certain timeframe or sources directly addressing challenges in the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival may be considered. Then, the researcher extracts relevant information from the selected sources. This includes identifying the issues faced by the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival, their causes, impacts, and any proposed solutions or responses.

In narrative reviews, the research design is typically qualitative in nature. The researcher identifies recurring themes and patterns in the challenges faced by the festival. In this study, involve content analysis to organize and categorize the information. The researcher synthesizes the findings from various sources to create a cohesive narrative that presents the issues of the *Kaamatan* Festival in Sabah. The review may include historical context, cultural significance, and the broader implications of these challenges on the festival and the local community.

### **4 Findings**

#### **4.1 Issues Arisen in *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival**

The *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival in Sabah has yearly encountered several problems and challenges. One potential issue that may arise is cultural appropriation, wherein there are worries about the festival being commodified or utilised for tourism purposes without adequate respect and comprehension of its cultural importance (Allen, 2022). Improper adoption of traditional customs or symbols could result in cultural insensitivity and the erosion of the festival's essence. Kadazan villagers criticized both the federal government's 'open house' and the KDCA for not fully representing the true essence of *Kaamatan*. They felt that the commercialisation of the event, particularly with sponsors like Nestlé and Maggi being prominently present at Hongkod Koisaan, was one of the main reasons for this criticism (Barlocco, 2011; Gang et al., 2019). It is commonly believed that the use of the Rungus community's mother tongue in Sabah, Malaysia, is becoming less popular, particularly among the younger generation. This trend is seen because of modernisation, which has inadvertently led to a decreased interest in preserving their native language and a deviation from their traditional practices (Ationg et al., 2023; Doksil, 2023).



Figure 1: Commercialization of the event, including sponsorship from Nestlé and Maggi

#### 4.2 Environmental Impact in *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival

Additionally, there is the matter of environmental impact. The festival frequently incorporates activities like agricultural showcases, traditional games, and performances. Inadequate waste disposal, excessive utilization of natural resources, or harm inflicted upon the environment during these events can present environmental difficulties. As stated by Miwil (2021), one of the concrete challenges encountered by the communities in Sabah during the celebration of the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival is the endangerment of paddy, seed, and fruit crops. Sabahans face a recurring problem every year, which is the accumulation of uncollected garbage after the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival (Borneo Today, 2017). This issue not only creates an unsightly visual impact but also poses risks of disease transmission and causes discomfort due to unpleasant odors (Figure 2). The nearby communities and the public are adversely affected by this situation.



Figure 2: Uncollected garbage after *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival

#### 4.3 Social Cohesion in *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival

Social cohesion emerges as another prominent issue within the context of the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival. The festival is intended to be a celebration of unity and gratitude among the indigenous communities of Sabah. However, challenges related to inclusivity, intercultural understanding, and conflicts between different ethnic groups may arise, potentially undermining the harmonious spirit of the event. An example of such a challenge is the recurring clash between traditional performances and modern entertainment at both the Kadazan Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA) and village celebrations, as noted by Joseph et al. (2020). This clash signifies a conflict or disagreement between traditional cultural performances and the introduction of contemporary forms of entertainment. Furthermore, the excessive consumption of alcohol by certain individuals has detrimental consequences that extend beyond the individuals themselves (Figure 3). It affects their immediate surroundings, families, and

the entire community. Juanis et al. (2022) support this viewpoint by concluding that the harm caused by alcohol extends beyond the drinker.



Figure 3: Drunk people sleep during Pesta Kaamatan in Hongkod Koisaan KDCA Penampang

#### 4.4 Economic Disparity

Another issue that arises is economic disparity. The festival can serve as a stark reminder of economic disparities within the community, as certain individuals or groups may face challenges in fully participating due to financial limitations. This imbalance can hinder the overall inclusivity and accessibility of the celebration. Anjumin (2022) highlighted the concern of food vendors at the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival Bazaar charging excessive prices for food and beverages (Figure 4). Such pricing practices can have negative repercussions on both the reputation of the vendors and the festival itself. Word may spread among tourists, leading to a perception that the festival is exploitative or lacks fair pricing practices. This negative reputation can deter potential visitors and impact the overall success of the event. Furthermore, there is a disparity in airfare ticket prices for East Malaysian students returning to Sabah and Sarawak for the Harvest Festival compared to other festivals, as noted by Morhan (2023). The elevated airfare costs may result in a reduced number of East Malaysian students being able to travel back to their hometowns for the festival. Consequently, this can diminish the overall participation and vibrancy of the celebration, as fewer individuals are able to attend and join in the festivities with their loved ones.



Figure 4: Overcharging price during *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival

#### 4.5 Preservation of Tradition in *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival

The preservation of traditional customs and rituals associated with the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival can be a concern as society evolves and modernizes. There is a potential risk of the younger generation being less acquainted with these practices, leading to a potential erosion of cultural heritage and knowledge (Kamaruddin & Rosli,

2023). The preference of the current generation in Sabah for technology and shopping malls rather than preserving their ancestors' beliefs and traditions adds to the uncertainty surrounding the future of the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival (Adam et al., 2021; Bedford, 2018). The lack of empirical data to assess the decline of indigenous knowledge components over time presents a challenge. Without sufficient data, it becomes difficult to gauge the rate of loss and fully comprehend the extent of the issue (Reyes-García et al., 2014; Wilder et al., 2016).

#### 4.6 Covid-19 Impacts

A recent concern revolves around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival. Just like any other public gathering, this festival can be influenced by the ongoing pandemic. Issues related to health and safety, compliance with protocols, and the possibility of restrictions on public gatherings may affect the planning and overall experience of the festival. The *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival can be greatly affected by the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO). The MCO usually results in modified rituals and practices, as stated by Cai (2018). The implementation of the MCO, which imposed restrictions on movement and public gatherings, had a profound impact on the functionality and resilience of the food system (Figure 5). The festival, which relies on agricultural produce, traditional culinary practices, and community involvement, encountered significant obstacles due to disruptions in the supply chain, limited access to ingredients, and challenges in organising large-scale events. The vulnerability of the food system became evident as the MCO exposed the limitations and vulnerabilities in sustaining the traditional practices and festivities associated with the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival in Sabah.



Figure 5: Official Rice Ritual *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival with SOP



Table 1: Summary of Issues arise in *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival

| Authors  | Issues   |
|--|--|
| Ationg et al. (2023), Barlocco (2011), Doksil (2023), Gang et al. (2019)             | <p data-bbox="852 275 1383 310"><b><i>Cultural Appropriation</i></b></p> <ul data-bbox="906 310 1383 703" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="906 310 1383 405">• <i>Kaamatan</i> Harvest Festival in general merrymaking ending in the usual generalized drunkenness.</li> <li data-bbox="906 405 1383 590">• <i>Kadazan</i> villagers criticized both the federal government's 'open house' and the <i>Kadazan</i> Dusun Cultural Association (KDCA) for not fully representing the true essence of <i>Kaamatan</i>.</li> <li data-bbox="906 590 1383 703">• The Borneo Indigenous language faces decline and potential extinction without active practice and support.</li> </ul> |
| Borneo Today (2017), Inus (2022), Miwil (2021)                                       | <p data-bbox="852 703 1383 739"><b><i>Environmental Impact</i></b></p> <ul data-bbox="906 739 1383 1045" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="906 739 1383 833">• Endangered paddy, seed and fruit crops while celebrating <i>Kaamatan</i> Harvest Festival.</li> <li data-bbox="906 833 1383 1045">• Uncollected rubbish after the <i>Kaamatan</i> Harvest Festival can be visually unpleasant, spread diseases, and cause distress due to the foul smell. This affects nearby communities and the public.</li> </ul>  |
| Joseph et al. (2020), Juanis et al. (2022)   | <p data-bbox="852 1045 1383 1081"><b><i>Social Cohesion</i></b></p> <ul data-bbox="906 1081 1383 1423" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="906 1081 1383 1176">• Traditional performance and entertainment constantly clashed at the KDCA and village celebrations.</li> <li data-bbox="906 1176 1383 1329">• Excessive alcohol consumption by certain individuals had detrimental consequences, affecting not only themselves but also their surroundings, families, and the entire community.</li> <li data-bbox="906 1329 1383 1423">• The harm caused by alcohol extends beyond the drinker.</li> </ul>  |
| Adam et al. (2021), Bedford (2018), Wilder et al. (2016), Reyes-García et al. (2014) | <p data-bbox="852 1423 1383 1459"><b><i>Preservation of Tradition</i></b></p> <ul data-bbox="906 1459 1383 1852" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="906 1459 1383 1644">• <i>Kaamatan</i> Harvest Festival in Sabah is uncertain due to the current generation's preference for technology and shopping malls instead of preserving their ancestors' beliefs and traditions.</li> <li data-bbox="906 1644 1383 1852">• The lack of empirical data to evaluate the loss of indigenous knowledge components over time poses a challenge. Without sufficient data, it becomes difficult to estimate the rate of loss and understand the extent of the problem.</li> </ul>              |

Anjumin (2022), Morhan (2023)

#### ***Economic Disparity***

- Food vendors at the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival Bazaar charge excessive prices for food and beverages
- Airfare tickets for East Malaysian students returning to Sabah and Sarawak for the Harvest Festival are more expensive compared to other festivals.

Ong and Wilson (2020), Cai (2018)

#### ***Covid-19 Impact***

- In the first weeks of the Government's Movement Control Order (MCO) it became immediately clear how fragile Sabah whole supply system had become.

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## **5 Study Implications and Limitations**

The study implications of *Kaamatan* Festival in Sabah are significant for various stakeholders, researchers, and policymakers. Understanding and addressing these challenges can have broader implications for cultural preservation, sustainable development, and community well-being. The *Kaamatan* Festival is a vital aspect of the Kadazandusun cultural heritage. By studying the challenges, it faces, researchers can gain insights into the broader issues of cultural preservation and the impacts of modernisation and globalisation on indigenous traditions. This research can inform strategies to safeguard other traditional festivals and cultural practices in Sabah and beyond.

The festival attracts both local and international tourists, contributing to the region's economy. However, sustainable cultural tourism is essential to avoid negative impacts on the environment and the authenticity of the festival. Studying the challenges can lead to the development of responsible tourism practices that promote economic growth while respecting the cultural values and natural resources. Policymakers can use the findings from studies on the challenges of the *Kaamatan* Festival to design targeted policies and initiatives. These policies may include measures to promote cultural heritage preservation, support sustainable tourism practices, and address environmental concerns.

The festival's sustainability is hindered by the ongoing issue of environmental degradation. The rapid urbanization and deforestation in the region pose a threat to the natural resources that form an integral part of the *Kaamatan* Festival. Preserving the environment and promoting sustainable practices are essential for the long-term survival of this cultural celebration. Another challenge lies in the limited awareness and understanding of the festival outside of the local community. Despite its rich heritage and unique customs, the *Kaamatan* Festival remains relatively unknown to

many people beyond Sabah. Efforts should be made to raise awareness and promote the festival at a national and international level, allowing more people to appreciate and participate in this cultural event.

Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort from various stakeholders, including the government, local communities, and cultural organizations. It is crucial to strike a balance between preserving the festival's traditional roots and embracing necessary adaptations to keep it relevant and accessible in the changing times. The *Kaamatan* Festival serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of identity and pride among the Kadazandusun community. By acknowledging and overcoming these challenges, we can ensure that this vibrant festival continues to thrive, passing on its rich traditions to future generations and promoting cultural diversity and understanding.

## **6 Direction for Future Research**

To improve the *Kaamatan* Harvest Festival and address its challenges, it is essential to adopt a proactive and collaborative approach. Firstly, cultural sensitivity and education should be prioritized (Francis et al., 2023). This can be achieved by promoting awareness and understanding of the festival's significance and traditions among participants, visitors, and stakeholders (Andersson & Getz, 2008). Various methods can be employed, such as organizing workshops, providing informational materials, or setting up interactive displays that facilitate learning, fostering appreciation, and cultivating respect for the cultural heritage of the indigenous communities involved in the festival.

In future research, it is crucial to assess the level of community involvement and consultation (Peter & Slater, 2010). This entails actively engaging local communities, particularly indigenous groups, in the planning and decision-making processes of the festival. It is important to seek their input, ideas, and feedback to ensure that the festival genuinely reflects their cultural practices and aspirations. Adopting a participatory approach can help foster a sense of ownership among the communities and promote inclusivity within the festival.

Future research should prioritise the investigation of sustainability practices in their studies (Larasti, 2020). They should focus on implementing environmentally friendly initiatives during festivals to decrease their ecological impact. Special attention should be given to waste reduction, recycling, efficient energy utilization, and responsible sourcing of materials. It is essential to encourage vendors and participants to embrace sustainable practices and educate festival attendees about the significance of environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, it is crucial to include the assessment of intercultural exchange and understanding in future research. It is recommended to arrange events or activities that promote intercultural exchange, thereby facilitating dialogue and understanding among various ethnic groups. Encouraging the sharing of cultural traditions,

performances, and culinary experiences will contribute to fostering inclusivity and cultivating an appreciation for diverse cultural expressions.

Another important aspect is the preservation and promotion of traditional arts and crafts. It is essential to create platforms and offer support to local artisans, enabling them to showcase their traditional arts and crafts during the festival (Wong, 2022). This initiative not only helps safeguard cultural heritage but also provides economic opportunities for the community. It is crucial to encourage the use of authentic and locally made products to prevent the commodification of cultural symbols.

Additionally, continuous evaluation and improvement are necessary. Regularly assess the festival's impact, gather feedback from stakeholders, and identify areas that require enhancement. Conduct post-event evaluations to determine both successes and challenges, which can serve as valuable insights for future planning and decision-making processes. Adapt and refine strategies based on the lessons learned to continually enhance the festival from year to year (Nordvall & Brown, 2018).

## **7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the *Kaamatan* Festival, a vibrant celebration of the Kadazandusun culture in Sabah, faces several challenges that need to be addressed to ensure its preservation and continued success. One significant challenge is the encroachment of modernization and globalization, which threatens to dilute the traditional elements of the festival. The influx of commercialization and external influences can overshadow the festival's original purpose and cultural significance. The findings provide valuable insights into the development of festival tourism research and the current state of knowledge in each identified research area. This enables the direction of future research, contributing to the expertise and advancement of scientific knowledge in festival and heritage tourism. Moreover, the results establish a solid foundation for studying the generation of tourism policies that focus on the contributions of festival tourism to local development, the preservation of cultural practices, and the planning, management, promotion, and communication of tourist offerings within a specific region.

## **8 About the author**

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