

# SACRED NATURAL SITES IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL CHANGES: THE CASE OF MOUNT KINABALU IN MALAYSIAN BORNEO

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## ABSTRACT

*Many indigenous communities worldwide assign special recognition to natural places and designate them sacred sites. There are various reasons for the sacredness of natural sites, including places where deities and ancestral spirits reside, where physical and non-physical healings can occur; where humankind can contact the spiritual entity, and where revelation and transformation can occur. However, many sacred natural sites are susceptible to threats, particularly those related to modernization and globalization. Based on this background, this study sought to examine the status of the sacredness of Mount Kinabalu within the context of global changes by analysing the traditional cultural and spiritual values of the indigenous Dusun community. Specifically, it attempted to answer two research questions: Is Mount Kinabalu still considered a sacred mountain by the Dusun community today? How have modernization and globalization impacted the sacredness of Mount Kinabalu? The study compared the older and the younger Dusun in their responses to gain deeper insights into these questions. The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design. It used questionnaires to collect data from the Dusun living in two principal villages at the foot of Mount Kinabalu. Data from 381 completed questionnaires were analyzed using percentages and mean scores. The key results showed*



*a decline in traditional cultural and spiritual values among the younger Dusun, which might further mean they no longer ascribed a spiritual significance to Mount Kinabalu as the older Dusun did. The decline could negatively impact biodiversity conservation and the community's ethnic identity, lifestyles, and rights. The study concluded with a suggestion for responses to the change.*

**Keywords:** *Sacred Natural Sites, Indigenous Communities, Spiritual Relationships, Globalization, Mount Kinabalu*

## INTRODUCTION

Sacred natural sites (SNSs hereafter) are places, usually in natural areas, that indigenous peoples and communities consider holding a special spiritual or religious importance (Verschuuren et al., 2010; Oviedo et al., 2005; Oviedo, 2001; WWF International, 2001). Among the diverse natural elements, mountains, as the highest features of the landscape, have long been linked with the highest values and aspirations of cultures worldwide (Bernbaum, 2010). As a result, many mountains around the world are considered sacred. Examples: Mount Fuji in Japan is regarded as a holy kami or spirit in the Shinto religion (Cartwright, 2017); the Abrahamic faiths believe Mount Sinai in Egypt is the mountain where God appeared to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments (Augustyn, 2022); Mount Kailash in Tibet is considered sacred by the Hindus, Buddhists, and Bons for different reasons (Polidor, 2014); Mount Cook in New Zealand represents the most sacred of ancestors (Haerewa, 2016); Mount Everest is holy to the Sherpas who consider the mountain the Mother Goddess of the World (Adventure Travel, 2021); the San Francisco Peaks are held sacred by more than 13 Native American tribes who believe the peaks are the home of their deities (Corbin, 2009a), to name a few.

Numerous reasons underpin the sacredness of natural sites, including where deities and ancestral spirits reside, where physical and non-physical healings can occur, where humankind can contact the spiritual entity or non-human reality, and where revelation and transformation can take place (Shinde, 2021; Bernbaum, 2017; Verschuuren et al., 2010). In the case of mountains, Bernbaum (1997) identified ten reasons why many indigenous

and traditional peoples worldwide consider mountains sacred, namely, i) the mountain as a high place, ii) the deity or abode of a deity, iii) place of power, iv) center, v) symbol of identity, vi) ancestor or abode of the dead, vii) garden or paradise, viii) temple or place of worship, ix) source of water and other blessings, and x) place of revelation, transformation, or inspiration.

Although many sacred natural sites are recognized for their spiritual and cultural significance and are protected in one way or another (for example, through the establishment of UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Sites), many are susceptible to threats, particularly those related to modernization and globalization. Demographic changes, erosion of traditional values when institutionalized religions are embraced, modern land reform initiatives, tourism, changing social and economic aspirations of communities, immigration patterns, and administrative and policy changes are all bound to jeopardize SNSs (Verschuuren et al., 2022; Sinthumule et al., 2021; Bernbaum, 2010; Verschuuren et al., 2010; Oviedo et al., 2005; WWF International, 2001). Bernbaum (2010), for example, has identified climate change, modernization, and globalization as the factors particularly impacting the sacredness of mountains around the world.

Related literature has persistently mentioned that the mountain is sacred to the Indigenous Dusun (Bidder et al., 2022; Bidder & Polus, 2014). Nonetheless, in the face of modernization and globalization, questions arise: Is Mount Kinabalu still considered sacred by the Indigenous Dusun today? To what extent have modernization and globalization impacted the sacredness of Mount Kinabalu? Perhaps these questions have become especially pertinent these days, given that the area surrounding Mount Kinabalu has become one of the top tourism destinations in Sabah. Yet, to the best knowledge of the researcher, while there are numerous existing studies about Mount Kinabalu or Kinabalu Park, none has specifically explored the sacredness of Mount Kinabalu in the face of global changes.

Thus, based on this backdrop, this study was undertaken to achieve the following two objectives:

1. To examine the status of Mount Kinabalu's sacredness by analyzing the traditional cultural and spiritual values of the Indigenous Dusun who consider the mountain sacred.
2. To analyze the extent to which modernization and globalization have

impacted the sacredness of Mount Kinabalu.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Understanding Sacred Natural Sites**

Defining SNSs can be difficult because the concept is broad and open. To fully grasp the meaning of SNSs, it is vital to understand what each of the words means, such as the following:

- Sacred: this word carries different meanings to different people. Nonetheless, the general understanding is that the term implies deep respect and is put aside on religious or spiritual grounds (Verschuuren et al., 2010).
- Natural: this word suggests a place that encompasses some special kind of nature, though, within the academic discourse of SNSs, nature does not necessarily mean it is free of human interventions (Verschuuren et al., 2010).
- Site: this word infers a place, an area, or a natural feature of different scales, from the very small that entails a specific natural element (such as a mountain, hill, forest, grove, river, lake, lagoon, cave, island, spring, tree, rock, a plant species, an animal, etc.) to the very large that comprises a whole territory or an enormous landscape (Verschuuren et al., 2010; Oviedo et al., 2005).

When these three words are combined, then the overall understanding of SNSs is they are places, usually natural areas, that indigenous peoples and communities consider to hold a particular spiritual or religious importance (Verschuuren et al., 2022; Sachdeva, 2016; WWF International, 2001; Oviedo et al., 2005; Verschuuren et al., 2010).

The origins of SNSs can be traced back thousands of years ago. To illustrate, anthropological evidence has indicated some SNSs were associated with the tradition of an ancestral cult by the Neanderthals more than 60,000 years ago. Other examples, such as Australian sacred sites that date back to 50,000 years, rock arts as old as 20,000 years, and some Neolithic henges that go back to 5000 years ago, demonstrate the remote history of SNSs (Verschuuren et al., 2010). However, it was during the mid-

1990s that witnessed a growing interest in the prominence of sacred sites for living cultures, which subsequently sparked a dynamic exploration of novel concepts and interdisciplinary perspectives that have improved both the understanding and conservation of sacred sites (Berkes, 2012; Posey, 1999; Carmichael et al., 1994).

Verschuuren et al. (2010) contend that discussions on "who considers natural sites sacred" usually reflect two viewpoints: indigenous (which means being native to a place) and mainstream (which refers to what is shared by most people). They argued that indigenous religions and spiritualities founded most SNSs because of their much stronger nature ethics than the mainstream faiths, which are believed to have embraced or co-opted the idea of SNSs. However, things become convoluted when the line between indigenous and mainstream is crossed. Some mainstream faiths, such as Shintoism, Hinduism, Daoism, Jainism, and others, are considered indigenous to a certain degree (Berkes, 2012; Verschuuren et al., 2010).

Verschuuren et al. (2010) claim there are numerous reasons underpinning the sacredness of natural sites, including where deities and ancestral spirits live, where physical and non-physical healings can transpire, where humankind can communicate with a spiritual entity, and where revelation and transformation can occur. In some cases, SNSs can be temple sites, ancestral burial grounds, pilgrimage sites, and sites associated with special events such as the performance of a ritual (Shinde, 2021; Bernbaum, 2017; Berkes, 2012; Verschuuren et al., 2010). To illustrate these reasons, the following lists several SNSs around the world:

- Holy Hill Forests, China: holy to many ethnic groups in Yunnan who depend on the forests to sustain their livelihoods and worship in the sacred groves to fulfill their spiritual needs (Shengji, 2010).
- Ayers Rock, Australia: sacred to the Anangu people of the Pitjantjatjara Aboriginal tribe, who believe the rocks were built during the ancient creation period and are still inhabited by ancestor spirits (Ramani, 2018).
- Mount Fuji, Japan: the Japanese venerate the mountain as a stairway to heaven, a holy ground for pilgrimage, a site for receiving revelations, a dwelling place for deities and ancestors, and a portal to an ascetic otherworld (Lidz, 2017).
- Niger Delta, West Cameroon: the Bisieni and the Osiamia people consider

the lakes of the Niger Delta sacred because the lakes are home to the endangered West African Dwarf Crocodile, which is regarded as the people's brother (Anwana et al., 2010).

- Karakol Valley, Russia: sacred to the Altai people, with various religious monuments for worship and rituals, burial grounds with sacrificial calculations, and the healing mineral spring Arzhun – Suu (Dobson & Mamyev, 2010).
- Mahabodhi Tree, Bodh Gaya, India: an important pilgrimage site for Buddhists who believe the place to be where the Buddha reached enlightenment (Ramani, 2018).
- Coron Island, Philippines: the marine areas of the island are considered sacred to the Calamian Tagbanwa, who believe spirits reside in the holy lakes and entry to the island is strictly for a spiritual/cultural purpose and is governed by shamans (Sampang, 2010).

## **Significance of Sacred Natural Sites**

Previous studies on SNSs have highlighted the importance of SNSs in conserving nature and culture. However, understanding how SNSs help protect nature requires the knowledge of who has access to SNSs and the taboo linked to SNSs from the indigenous and traditional peoples' perspectives. Usually, SNSs are accessible to only a small group of people, such as traditional priests, shamans, or pilgrims (Verschuuren et al., 2022; Bernbaum, 2017; Berkes, 2012; Sampang, 2010). What's more, for certain SNSs, supernatural taboos or penalties (transmitted in ancient folklore and stories) are enacted to thwart the violation of SNSs. Nevertheless, owing to access restrictions and taboos, many SNSs have played a vital role in protecting the biological diversity found within them (Verschuuren et al., 2022; Sachdeva, 2016; Verschuuren, 2010; Dudley, Higgins-Zogib & Mansourian, 2009; Oviedo et al., 2005).

SNSs conserve culture in four important ways, such as the following (Verschuuren et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2021; Sachdeva, 2016; Sampang, 2010; Godbole et al., 2010; Dobson & Mamyev, 2010; Oviedo et al., 2005; WWF International, 2001; Oviedo, 2001):

## **Conserving Cultural Identity**

How indigenous peoples spiritually connect to the Earth partially

defines their ethnic identity. For many, nature offers potent representations to create strong relationships between humankind and nature. Due to this, it is onerous to disintegrate the solid interdependency between cultural identity, livelihoods and traditional environmental knowledge, ceremonial land use, and biodiversity protection (James, 2020; Dobson & Mamyev, 2010; Sampang, 2010; WWF International, 2001). For instance, the Hopi people who live on the mesas of the Colorado Plateau have always considered natural springs to be their soul, representing their very identity (James, 2020)

### **Contributing to Human Livelihoods**

Many SNSs support the livelihoods of indigenous people by providing valuable resources such as food, water, and medicines (Oviedo et al., 2005). For example, the sacred groves of the Western Ghats of India have provided the indigenous residents with wood, forest fruit, honey, sap, and other products (Godbole et al., 2010).

### **Supporting Indigenous and Traditional Peoples' Rights as a Precondition for Conservation**

Scholars and conservationists have acknowledged that conserving biodiversity can be tricky when indigenous peoples' rights are disrespected (WWF International, 2001). This understanding has led conservation agencies to safeguard the indigenous peoples' rights to control their lands, waters, and resources and to build their knowledge and skills to manage and monitor biological resources effectively.

### **Restoring the Balance between Indigenous Peoples and Protected Areas**

The idea of legally protecting SNSs in the forms of national parks, nature reserves, and forest reserves is a Western concept that is not always understood or appreciated by non-Western societies (Verschuuren, 2010). In many places, attempts to legally protect nature have resulted in adverse impacts on the indigenous peoples, such as being removed from their traditional lands to create protected natural areas (Goldman, 2011). Such negative impacts have caused much conflict and mistrust, making cooperation between indigenous/traditional peoples and conservation agencies an uphill battle.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Research Setting: Mount Kinabalu**

At 4095.2m, Mount Kinabalu is the highest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea (UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 2022) and the highest in Malaysia and the island of Borneo (Sabah Parks, 2022). Mount Kinabalu dominates the landscape of Kinabalu Park, which was gazetted in 1964 and subsequently inscribed on the World Heritage Site Listing in 2000 for the park's unique naturally functioning ecosystems and rich biodiversity (Sabah Parks, 2022; UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 2022).

The Indigenous Dusun people of Sabah have always considered Mount Kinabalu a sacred mountain. Historically, the mountain and surrounding forests provided resources for the Dusun's livelihoods (food, water, medicines, and materials for house construction). Moreover, in Indigenous Dusun's story of Creation, Mount Kinabalu is depicted as the center of the world. Most importantly, Mount Kinabalu is believed to be a place of ancestors or an abode of the dead/spirits. To the Indigenous Dusun, Mount Kinabalu is a resting place for the departed souls of their dead ancestors on their journey to the afterlife. During the traditional funeral of a deceased Dusun member, the deceased must be buried facing Mount Kinabalu so that the awakened spirit immediately sees the mountain and begins the afterlife journey. In the Dusun's worldview, the world is divided into three parts (as shown in Figure 1): Heaven called Libabou (which is the summit of Mount Kinabalu), Earth called Winorun (which constitutes Mount Kinabalu itself and where humankind lives), and Hell called Kolungkud (which encompasses everything below Mount Kinabalu) (Global Diversity Foundation, 2022; Bedford, 2018; Corbin, 2009b).

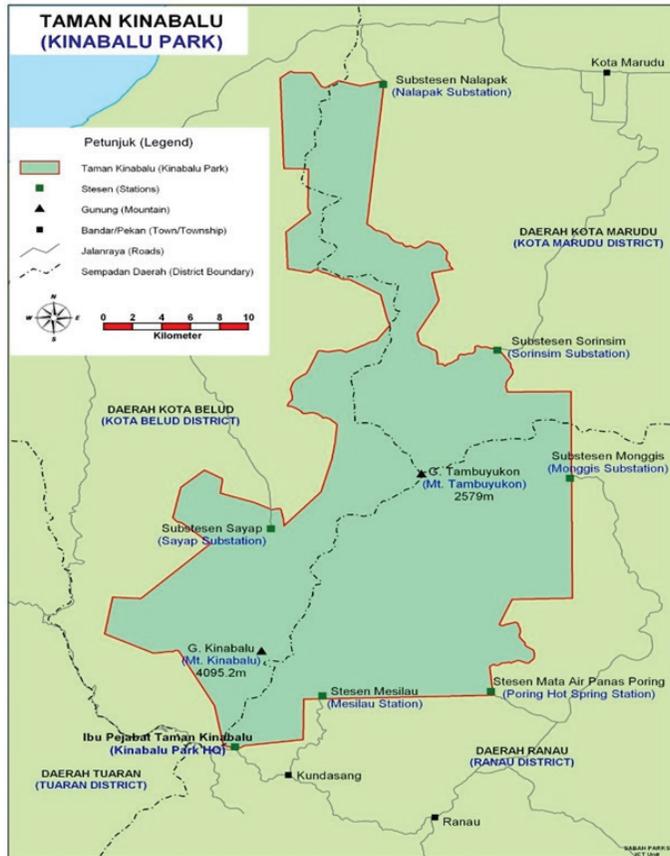


Figure 1. Location of Mount Kinabalu in Kinabalu Park

Soyrc: (Sabah Parks, 2022)

Three 7-Tiered Kadazandusun Worlds (Totu 7 Simbau Kopogunan Kadazandusun) © DNT					
H E A V E N  E A R T H  H E L L	UPPER WORLD LIBAUWU	<p>Sacred Mt. Kinabalu Summit (Pogobuan)</p> <p>Sea Level</p>	Kopinturu	Libabou Ko-7	7th Upper World
			Nipontal	Libabou Ko-6	6th Upper World
			Liamanduk	Libabou Ko-5	5th Upper World
			Sinorindak	Libabou Ko-4	4th Upper World
			Dangkirson	Libabou Ko-3	3rd Upper World
			Langkouen	Libabou Ko-2	2nd Upper World
			Lipompon	Libabou Ko-1	1st Upper World
MIDDLE WORLD WINORUN		Gouen	Winoran Ko-7	Clouded Level 7	
		Penakasen	Winoran Ko-6	Catchment Level 6	
		Tudanon	Winoran Ko-5	Spring Level 5	
		Kaisapen	Winoran Ko-4	Hoisting Level 4	
		Koroioyon	Winoran Ko-3	Flooding Level 3	
		Pitas	Winoran Ko-2	Extensive Level 2	
		Pionban	Winoran Ko-1	Riftzone (Sea Level)	
UNDER WORLD KOLONGKUD		Sandiron	Kolangkud Ko-1	1st Under World	
		Kotanshon	Kolangkud Ko-2	2nd Under World	
		Pangalon	Kolangkud Ko-3	3rd Under World	
		Tumpontin	Kolangkud Ko-4	4th Under World	
		Wimaton	Kolangkud Ko-5	5th Under World	
		Pipitak	Kolangkud Ko-6	6th Under World	
		Sandiron	Kolangkud Ko-7	7th Under World	

Figure 2. The Three Tiers of the Indigenous Dusun's World View

Source: (Topin, 2012)

## **Research Design**

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design. It collected quantifiable data on the Indigenous Dusun's traditional cultural and spiritual values at the foot of Mount Kinabalu. It attempted to obtain an overall picture of the phenomenon as it stood at the time of the study by taking a cross-section of the study population. The study also compared the older and the younger Dusun to gain more profound insights into the situation.

## **Sampling**

The researcher could not get the latest population statistics of the Dusun community living adjacent to Mount Kinabalu, but secondary records showed 45 villages with around 15,000 Dusun people (Hamzah, 2018). Therefore, using the sample size calculator provided by Survey Monkey (2022), with a study population of 15,000, a 95% Confidence Level, and a 5% Margin of Error, the ideal sample size was 376.

## **Instrument**

Questionnaires were used to collect data. The questionnaires comprised two sections such as the follows:

- Section A: Respondents' profile (Gender, age, ethnicity, religion, education, and occupation).
- Section B: Respondents' traditional cultural and spiritual values.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection took place from March until September 2020. With the help of seven acquaintances, the researcher went to two villages and their sub-villages nearest to Mount Kinabalu, namely Kiau village (Kiau Nuluh and Kiau Taburi) and Bundu Tuhan village (Sokid, Sibah, and Gondohon), to distribute the questionnaires door-to-door. Prior requests were made to the village heads and through the seven acquaintances to inform the villagers of the researcher's intention to conduct the study. During the questionnaire distribution, the researcher and her assistants administered the questionnaires to ensure questionnaire completion, obtain a higher response rate, clarify questions (especially for the less-educated respondents), and gather further information (particularly to understand the why question). Bahasa Malaysia

and the Dusun language were used as the mediums of communication. 389 questionnaires were completed, but 8 were rejected because the respondents were not of the Dusun ethnicity.

Data from the remaining 381 questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Percentages were used to analyze the categorical data from Section A of the questionnaire, and mean scores to examine the non-categorical data from Section B.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Respondents' Demographic Profile**

As Table 1 shows, there was an almost equal distribution of female and male respondents, 57% and 43%, respectively. There is no fixed way of categorizing groups based on age. However, some studies have used the following categories: 15 – 47 (young), 48 – 63 (middle age), and 64 and beyond (elderly). To have a comparable number of respondents in the Younger Dusun and Older Dusun groups, the researcher categorized those aged 15 – 30 and 31 – 45 as the younger Dusun (53%) and those in the 46 – 60 and  $\geq 61$  age ranges as the older Dusun (47%). Almost all the respondents were Dusun (98%) and affiliated with some organized religion (87%), especially Christianity. Furthermore, 45% of the respondents had secondary education (Forms 1 -5 of high school), 23% had primary education (Standards 1 – 6 of elementary school), 20% had tertiary education (education after high school such as college or university), and 12% did not have any formal education. In terms of occupation, farming (39%), tourism (25%), and civil service (16%) were the most frequently cited. It is important to note that virtually every family in the villages has a farm. The difference is whether farming is the primary income source or alternative work. The 39% of farming represented those who were full-time farmers.

**Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Profile**

Item		Percentage	Item		Percentage	
Gender	Female	57%	Religion	Organized	87%	
	Male	43%		Indigenous/ folk	13%	
Age	15 – 30	32%	Occupation	Unemployed	0%	
	31 – 45	21%		Student	11%	
	46 – 60	28%		Farming	39%	
	≥ 61	19%		Tourism	25%	
Ethnicity	Dusun	98%		Civil service	16%	
	Non-Dusun	2%		Private sector	9%	
Education	No formal education	12%				
	Primary	23%				
	Secondary	45%				
	Tertiary	20%				

Source: (Author, 2023)

### **A Comparative Analysis of the Traditional Cultural and Spiritual Values of the Older and Younger Dusun Respondents**

Table 2 presents the comparative results between the older and younger Dusun respondents on their cultural and spiritual values of Mount Kinabalu. Overall, the older respondents indicated higher values of the cultural and spiritual dimensions of Mount Kinabalu, evidenced by their much higher mean scores on all the items than the younger respondents.

In terms of the oral traditions associated with Mount Kinabalu, the older Dusun respondents knew much more about the stories revolving around the creation of the mountain by the supreme deities named Kinohiringan and his wife Umunsumundu as the center of the world than the younger respondents (4.32 vs. 2.76 mean scores). However, the knowledge gap was narrower for stories related to the origins of the name 'Kinabalu', with mean scores of 4.56 for the older and 3.39 for the younger respondents. These results may be caused by a greater or more frequent mention of the stories about Kinabalu's name origins in information materials than the stories about the mountain's creation.

Regarding the respondents' views of Mount Kinabalu's sacredness,

almost a quarter of the older Dusun respondents indicated they believed the mountain was sacred (71%). In contrast, not half of the younger respondents thought so (49%). Those who indicated they believed in Mount Kinabalu's sacredness were then asked to rate their overall knowledge of why it was considered sacred. For this item, the older Dusun respondents had a much higher mean score (4.11) than the younger respondents (2.58). On June 5, 2015, Mount Kinabalu and the surrounding areas were hit by a devastating 6.0-magnitude earthquake that killed several mountain guides and climbers and permanently damaged and changed the mountain's landscape. Some people offered a scientific explanation for the incident. But many locals blamed the few Western climbers who stripped and posed naked on the mountain's summit several weeks before the earthquake. To this item, 84% of the older Dusun respondents believed the earthquake was indeed caused by the nude incident, which had angered the spirits and desecrated the mountain. In comparison, only 37% of the younger respondents believed so.

The respondents were also asked about their perceptions of the Monolob ritual, which is a sacrificial rite conducted by a shaman for safe passage to the mountain for all climbers and involves the slaughtering of seven chickens, which will be made as an offering to the spirits of Mount Kinabalu, together with various charms and paraphernalia such as chicken eggs, betel nuts, betel leaves, and cigars. Overall, the older Dusun respondents showed higher knowledge of the ritual, why it was performed, how it was performed, and who performed it than the younger respondents, as shown in Table 2.

Another item to compare between the older and the younger Dusun respondents was related to Bobolian, who is a high priestess, a ritual specialist, and a spirit medium in the Dusun people's cultural and spiritual traditions. In the context of Mount Kinabalu, Bobolian is the one who performs the Monolob ritual previously mentioned. In general, the older and younger Dusun respondents suggested high knowledge of who the Bobolian was in the Dusun's cultural and spiritual traditions, with 100% and 87%, respectively. Moreover, both groups of respondents showed little difference in knowing a Bobolian in their immediate social circles (51% for the older and 43% for the younger). However, to the question, 'Do you aspire to become a Bobolian one day?' less than half of the older respondents indicated a yes (43%). In contrast, a negligible number of the

younger respondents showed so (4%).

Finally, the respondents were asked about the annual pilgrimage of Mount Kinabalu called the Kakakapan id Gayo Ngaran (meaning "Return to Mount Kinabalu"; Gayo Ngaran is a name given to Mount Kinabalu by the villagers of Bundu Tuhan, literally translated as the 'Big Name'). The annual pilgrimage started in 2010 in response to the Dusun's loss of rights when Mount Kinabalu and the surrounding areas were gazetted as a state park in 1964. It aims to restore the Dusun's spiritual connections with Mount Kinabalu and revitalize their deep cultural knowledge of the mountain and surrounding forests. To this item, the older Dusun respondents showed a higher mean score (4.01) than the younger respondents (2.33) in their knowledge of the annual pilgrimage. Many older respondents had participated in the pilgrimage at least once (64%) compared to the younger respondents (37%). Those who had not participated in the annual pilgrimage were asked if they would be interested in doing so one day. 70% of the older respondents said yes, while only slightly over half of the younger respondents indicated so (53%).

**Table 2. A Comparative Analysis of Older and Younger Dusun Respondents on Their Traditional Cultural and Spiritual Values**

Item	Mean Score/ Percentageb	
	Older Dusun	Younger Dusun
1) Rate knowledge of Mt. Kinabalu's legends/oral traditions.		
i. Creation stories	4.32	2.76
ii. Origins of the name "Kinabalu"	4.56	3.39
2) Mt. Kinabalu's sacredness		
i. Do you think Mt. Kinabalu is sacred?	71%	49%
i. Rate knowledge on why Mt. Kinabalu is considered sacred. (Only those who answered yes to 2ii)	4.11	2.58
i. The 2015 earthquake, do you think it was caused by the mountain spirits being angered by the nude incident?	84%	37%
3) Monolob ritual		
i. Do you know what the Monolob ritual is?	87%	21%
ii. Do you know why the Monolob ritual is performed?	78%	23%
iii. Do you know how the Monolob ritual is performed?	65%	19%
iv. Do you know who performs the Monolob ritual?	100%	66%
4) Bobolian aspiration		

i. Overall, rate knowledge on the Kakakapan id Gayo Ngaran Mt. Kinabalu's annual pilgrimage.	4.01	2.33
ii. Have you participated in it?	64%	37%
iii. If you haven't participated in it, would you like to one day?	70%	53%

aBased on a 5-point Likert-scale where 1 = very low and 5 = very high.

bThe percentages represent only the "Yes" answers.

Source: (Author, 2023)

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the results show that the traditional cultural and spiritual values of the younger Dusun living adjacent to Mount Kinabalu are in decline. Several reasons may explain the decline. For a start, while the villagers are cautious not to allow outsiders to buy their land and permanently settle in their villages or develop the land for purposes other than what they deem compatible with their community values and practices, they are not immune to the influence of modernization and globalization happening in their surroundings and worldwide. For instance, tourism is flourishing in the villages due to their proximity to Kinabalu Park (a primary tourist draw for both international and domestic visitors). As a result, private accommodations, resorts, restaurants, tourist attractions, and activities are mushrooming virtually everywhere. Starting in 2005, international and other Malaysian climbers dominated Mount Kinabalu climbing statistics (Bidder & Polus, 2014). However, things changed in favor of the Dusun and other locals of Sabah during the COVID-19 pandemic when the country's international borders were closed, bringing international tourism to a standstill. During the pandemic, many Sabah's locals climbed the mountain because the climbing fees were highly affordable, and climbing spots were quickly secured. Now that the pandemic has been declared endemic and international tourism in the country has restarted, things are, unfortunately, changing again to the disadvantage of the Sabah's locals.

Tourism has even permeated the social and economic fabrics of the villages, evidenced by the organization of community-based tourism activities such as homestays, the ability to speak major tourist languages such as English by many younger Dusun, and employment in the tourism industry, especially as rangers, guides, and porters for Mount Kinabalu. As Bernbaum (2010) mentioned, among the various forms of globalization,

tourism probably has the most significant and widespread impact on sacred mountains and the indigenous peoples living close to them.

Modernization and globalization may also have encouraged many younger Dusun to pursue social and economic aspirations or paths different from those of the older Dusun. To illustrate, they may aspire to higher education, a career outside of agriculture (the main traditional field of work in the villages), and a living environment beyond their villages/rural areas.

Moreover, the decline in traditional cultural and spiritual values may be attributed to the adoption of institutionalized religions. For example, in the 1970s, many Dusun people in Sabah converted to Evangelical Christianity introduced by missionaries. Many respondents, especially the younger Dusun, indicated that they would not aspire to become a Bobolian. When asked why, most answered that they are now affiliated with organized religion and that such traditions as Bobolian and Monolob, as well as the spiritual beliefs in natural features, are associated with paganism or superstition that is against the teachings of their organized religion. Some of the older Dusun respondents had also expressed their worries about the dying tradition of Bobolian, citing that the youngsters are no longer interested in or believe in such a thing.

When the older respondents who had participated in the Mount Kinabalu pilgrimage were asked why they did it, their answers were mostly a mix of working as a mountain guide/porter, Mount Kinabalu being a heritage mountain, so they must climb it at least once in a lifetime, and Mount Kinabalu being part of the Dusun's spirituality so climbing it would be a spiritual privilege. The answers the younger respondents gave, however, were more secular, including working as a mountain guide/porter, checking off a travel bucket list, testing physical fitness, and creating memories with family/friends.

The decline of traditional cultural and spiritual values among the younger Dusun may mean they do not ascribe a spiritual significance to Mount Kinabalu as the older Dusun do. If this decline persists, then perhaps for the next generations, Mount Kinabalu will no longer be viewed as sacred but just as a high mountain perfect for recreation. And the statement, "Mount Kinabalu is a sacred mountain for the Dusun community", will be

a statement of historical meaning.

If the decline persists, there may be more serious, long-term consequences, including the potential negative impacts on biodiversity conservation. For example, it was the older villagers of Bundu Tuhan who initiated what they called a community forest to guard their lands and forests adjacent to Mount Kinabalu against degradation caused by logging or overdevelopment and to preserve their indigenous way of life and traditional ecological knowledge (such as the different flora and fauna species, the uses of forest resources for medicines, etc.). Those older villagers went all out to materialize this community forest because of their strong belief in having an essential spiritual relationship with Mount Kinabalu. Now that the younger Dusun hold secular views of Mount Kinabalu, will they still feel as strongly as the older Dusun in protecting the mountain or in conserving their cultural identity, lifestyle, and rights as the indigenous people who have spiritual connections with the mountain? Perhaps only time will tell.

The declining sacredness of Mount Kinabalu due to the dwindling traditional cultural and spiritual values is not an isolated case, though. Previous researchers in the field have presented similar cases caused by global changes. For instance, Purohit & Bernbaum (1999) discussed the destruction of a forest that contained some sacred trees in Badrinath (a primary Hindu pilgrimage site in the Indian Himalayas) when the Indian government constructed a road to Badrinath. In another example, Bernbaum (1997) mentioned the severe environmental problems of litter and waste plaquing Mount Fuji when Japan opened it to the outside world. The sacred mountain became a national symbol and attracted thousands of pilgrims and climbers. Other mountains, such as Mount Everest and the San Francisco Peaks, have been so saturated with tourism activities that conflicts with traditional stakeholders and their cultural and spiritual values have occurred (Bernbaum, 2010).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study examined the status of Mount Kinabalu's sacredness by analyzing the traditional cultural and spiritual values of the Indigenous Dusun, who consider the mountain sacred. It also explored the extent to which

modernization and globalization have impacted the sacredness of Mount Kinabalu. The significant findings indicate that the sacredness of Mount Kinabalu has dwindled in the face of modernization and globalization, particularly among the younger generations. Tourism is the most prominent force of modernization and globalization for the Indigenous Dusun living close to Mount Kinabalu. With the arrival and continuous growth of tourism, the connections between the villagers and their traditional cultural and spiritual values surrounding the mountain are becoming more detached with the ticking of time. Other modernization and globalization forces that have propelled this detachment are changing economic aspirations and socio-cultural values with the adoption of mainstream faiths and higher education.

However, this study does not suggest that modernization and globalization are all-adverse phenomena. On the contrary, perhaps no single place or society can be perpetually immune to global changes. After all, places, people, knowledge, values, and practices are dynamic in response to changing circumstances. Therefore, instead of resisting inevitable changes, it may be more practical to adapt and mitigate their impacts.

This study is not without limitations. Data was collected from only two villages, namely Kiau and Bundu Tuhan, when there are other Indigenous Dusun villages around Mount Kinabalu, such as Sayap, Tambatuon, Lobong-Lobong, and so on. For the research findings to be more representative of the Indigenous Dusun in their beliefs toward Mount Kinabalu's sacredness, data should be collected from the Indigenous Dusun living beyond the most famous villages of Kiau and Bundu Tuhan.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest with any individuals or organizations.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION**

The single author wrote the paper and did all the work, from questionnaire design to data collection, data analysis, and writing all the sections that constitute the entire article.

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