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## The Dying Tradition of Kalesa Industry in the City of Laoag

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### ABSTRACT

The Kalesa, a traditional horse-drawn carriage, has been an iconic symbol of Filipino culture and heritage for centuries. However, in recent years, the once vibrant Kalesa industry in Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, has been facing a steady decline. This research abstract aims to investigate the factors contributing to the demise of this traditional mode of transportation and its associated industry. Through a combination of qualitative interviews, this study examines the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors that have led to the dwindling presence of Kalesas in Laoag City. Furthermore, historical research was done to look at primary sources and secondary documents on the Kalesa's contribution to the city's growth, especially in terms of its local economy and distinctive features that let people appreciate its local color even more.

### INTRODUCTION

In the City of Laoag, the capital town of the Province of Ilocos Norte, the kalesa, a traditional horse-drawn carriage, has long been an iconic symbol of its culture, evoking images of bygone eras and quaint charm. It stands today as a powerful cultural symbol of this town depicting the journey of Laoag from the past up to the present.

It was during the Spanish colonial period in the eighteenth where Kalesa was introduced in Laoag and in similar parts of the country as means of transportation. This influence spread throughout the archipelago. Being a unique historic carrier, it is particularly favored by tourists who want to explore the city's historical landscapes (Mailed & Belizar, 2004).

It may be a carriage with two enormous wheels on each side, a roof to provide shelter from the sun, and a horse pulling the carriage at that point. The kalesa can accommodate a maximum of four people. The design, length, and passenger capacity of the kalesa have improved during the course of the lengthy journey. These days, the kalesa has more enriching features and is mostly used as a tourist attraction (Robles et al., 2021).

For locals, the kalesa was more than just a mode of transportation but also a familiar part of their everyday life. It provided a link between neighborhoods, markets, and important landmarks, facilitating social interactions and commerce within the city. It played a role in transporting goods and materials, serving as vital lifeline for the local economy.

Beyond its practical and symbolic functions, the kalesa also contributed to the social fabric of Laoag during the Spanish colonial era; providing a space for conversations and interaction among passengers and served as a gathering point for members of the community. In this

way, the kalesa not only facilitated physical movement but also fostered a sense of community and connection within the city.

For generations, these iconic carriages played multifaceted roles for the Laoageños. But, as the relentless march of modernization sweeps across the urban landscape, the glow of the kalesa industry slowly fades over the years, casting a shadow over its once-prominent place in the hearts and minds of the community.

The City Government of Laoag and the Laoageños have made efforts to preserve this cultural heritage and it somehow helped its continued existence, ensuring that their legacy will not entirely fade away. The Laoageños adapted the demands of modernization but did not totally remove kalesa as part of their culture.

Although, decades have passed, and technology have become more advanced, the rapid urbanization, alongside the proliferation of modern vehicles and infrastructure intensified the numerous unending challenges to "Panagkalkalesa". What even worsen their situation is when the COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented challenge to the survival and livelihood of everyone specially the drivers and operators of this industry.

The story of the decline of the kalesa industry in Laoag is one of the many gradual transformations, shaped by a myriad of economic, social, and technological forces. People would say that the world has now jumped to a new era called "New Normal", a paradigm shift that resulted from the unprecedented changes and adaptations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hence, this study was conceptualized to look into the significance of Kalesa industry of Laoag City and its place in this contemporary world of technological advancements.

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## Research Questions

1. How did the kalesa evolve as local industry in Laoag City?
2. How does the Kalesa represent Laoag City's local color?
3. What is the present status of the kalesa industry in Laoag City?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

This study is qualitative research that focuses on the historical, social, and economic significance of Kalesa in the City of Laoag. The approach used was qualitative, in order to generate significant themes from the participants. Hence, interview was the method employed by the researchers to dwell on the participants' perspectives about the study being explored. Moreover, historical research was also conducted to examine primary sources and secondary records regarding the Kalesa's role in the development of the city particularly on its local economy and the unique contributions gearing toward further appreciation of its local color.

### Population and Sampling Technique

This study employed purposive sampling from a heterogeneous population; (10) kutseros, one (1) tourism officer from the City of Laoag, five (5) Ilocano cultural educators and researchers, and twenty (20) individual Laoageños. A variety of avenues, including as social media sites, trade associations, and professional networks, were used to find participants. An attempt was made to guarantee a range of insightful viewpoints.

### Research Instrument

In this study, a qualitative interview guide was developed to make the process of gathering data easier. The interview guide comprised open-ended questions intended to elicit in-depth responses from participants regarding their opinions, encounters, and insights regarding the Laoag kalesa industry.

Participants were purposively selected based on their knowledge, experiences, and involvement in the kalesa industry, as well as their insights into cultural heritage preservation efforts by Ilocos Norte Tourism office and the Laoag City Tourism office.

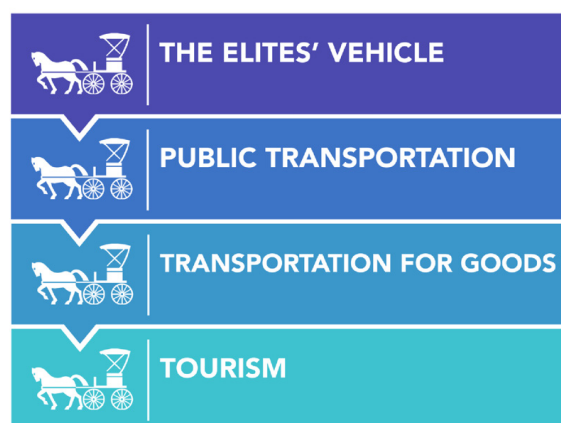
### Data Gathering Procedure and Tool

Before the surveys and interviews were conducted, a letter of permission and request were sent to the Tourism office of Laoag City, and to the local historians and experts about the subject matter. And upon receiving the confirmations, the researchers proposed a schedule where and when they can be interviewed. On the day of the interview, researchers confirmed again and got a heads-up from the tourism officials as well as educators and researchers. Following the interview, a survey was conducted with the Laoageños and Kutseros. Finally, after gathering all the data, the researchers examined,

evaluated, and condensed the information they had gathered.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study is qualitative research which utilized field surveys and interview work to gather information. Other data sources were documentary films such as the "Karitelang Kupas" of Ersamvier Productions, and some literature reviews about Kalesas in the Philippines. From these sources, data were critically compiled and analyzed to comprehensively present a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to the dying tradition of the Kalesa industry in the Philippines.



**Figure 1:** Evolution of the Kalesa Industry in Laoag City.

### The Evolution of Kalesa Industry in Laoag City

According to Ferline, a blog writer from the Museo Iloco of Laoag City, the history of Kalesa in Laoag can be traced back in the eighteenth century when the Spanish conquistadors first introduced it. Only the aristocracy, colonial officials, and elite families could afford to travel in kalesas at that time. A special car reserved for upper class individuals. That is, until it developed into a popular means of public transit.

This transition benefited most Laoageño laborers since their town is situated at the heart of the province, serving as an ideal commerce and administrative hub. The wide use of Kalesa has helped them and their economy to grow with its continuing high demand.

### One respondent added

"Ti panagkalkalesa iti nangited ti pagsapulan biag kadagiti lol-lolo kada tat-tatang mi idi. Gappu kadagitoy nga kalesa, naikkan iti pam-pamilya mi iti tiyansa tapno masuportaran dagiti kasapulan mi iti biyag."

"This livelihood brought by kalesas is what gave our fathers and grandfathers a chance of living. Because of these kalesas, our families were given something to support our needs."

In addition to being a means of transportation for people, the kutseros mentioned that in the past, kalesa was also modified to function as a flexible means of transporting cargo. During that period, Kalesa was the only transport vehicle that could actually go through

small streets and support somewhat large loads. And as a result, this became an enduring representation of support and resiliency, providing priceless mobility options for the community's residents.

Kalesa persisted in the life of Laoageños until the advent of modernization led to its progressive decline. Demand for kalesa services decreased as more people had access to and used modern forms of transportation like cars, buses, jeepneys, and motorcycles. The most concrete documentation that challenged kalesa is the presence of jeepneys which became a popular means of public transportation in the Philippines (Brillantes, 2020). The Jeepneys originally remodeled vehicles from the US military jeeps as a leftover and later blended it with decorative elements to attract the riding public. The jeepneys initially became a symbol of Philippine popular culture. The Willys and Ford Company became instrumental in refurbishing military jeeps for public transport aided by surplus engines from Japan. These jeeps were later known as PUJ or Public Utility Jeep (Bellisario, 2020). As a result, the kalesa, a traditional horse-drawn carriage, saw a significant decline in its use. The efficiency, capacity, and affordability of jeepneys made them the preferred choice for the commuting public and there were less skilled kutseros because newer generations went toward other careers. Moreover, Laoag City's terrain was changed by development, losing the old paths and areas where kalesas had previously flourished. The kutseros said in the interview that ever since modernity began, people have reprimanded them for continuing to use the streets and told them to quit using kalesa. They felt marginalized and insignificant in some way by society, but they persisted.

But because of the government's, concerned citizens', and kutseros' collective efforts, the kalesa industry survived and gained new significance in the travel and tourism sector. Even while kalesas aren't utilized as a major means of transportation anymore, tourism has helped to recognize them as a treasured emblem of Laoag's culture and heritage, striking a careful balance between preserving the past and moving forward. Kalesa owes its existence to tourism, which also ensures that it will always be relevant to the Laoageño identity.

As the City tourism officer Angel Lao, said during the Calesa Parade of the 27th Pamulinawen Festival celebration, "Tulong-tulong tayo na i-promote ang ating kalesa tradition because this is part of the story and history of every Laoageño."

"Let us help each other in promoting the Kalesa tradition because is part of the story and history of every Laoageño."

The kalesa industry's development in Laoag City demonstrates how adaptable and durable this age-old custom can be in the face of change. The kalesa has overcome adversity and grabbed opportunities for rebirth, from its early days as the primary means of transportation throughout history to its current position as a cultural symbol. Kalesas are still in existence today because of

the mutually beneficial relationships between tourism, economic sustainability, and cultural preservation.

### Kalesa as a Representation of Laoag City's Local Colors

Although kalesas were common in the Philippines, only the most forward-thinking cities were able to fully adopt and make use of them. The only well-known town in the Province of Ilocos Norte that prospered with these Kalesas was Laoag. They had grown to rely on this famous transporter, which had provided Laoageños with both utilitarian and cultural benefits.

While kalesas may be considered only a means of transportation to others, the Laoageño people view them as an essential component in the formation of their identity, values, and character. Its presence has brought about exceptional traits that capture the vibrant assortment of their town's distinct individuality.

The elegant and historic form of Kalesas has become a symbol of the city's tourism and culture. Because it is uncommon, travelers tend to favor it for it is a vintage carrier for them to tour the city and take in its historical scenery. Additionally, it offers guests a fascinating window into the city's cultural past. The kalesa continues to be significant to native Filipinos' sense of cultural identity and legacy even in the age of modernity. It remains an important symbol of Philippine history and culture. In fact, National Artist for Literature Nick Joaquin described the kalesa as a 'symbol of the Filipino's soul' (Pineda, 2024).

### Craftsmanship and Artistry

The artistic abilities of Laoageños are eloquently illustrated in the Kalesas of Laoag. Instead of using the metro's basic design, Laoageños chose to design their own version while preserving the original's passenger capacity. The Filipino-adapted kalesa can carry two passengers, although the traditional kalesa may accommodate up to four people. Ilocanos, who are renowned for their practicality, created the reduced version of the original kalesa that is tailored to Filipino tastes without sacrificing its ability to accommodate people.

In addition, Laoageños transform their kalesas into colorful carriages that are adorned with intricately carved wood designs and paintings of objects such as the sun, signifying their Pamulinawen festival. It was also mentioned by the kutseros that their ancestors painted the faces of their loved ones on the carriages. As a result, the carriage surfaces have been transformed into canvases with the testaments of the kutseros' inspiration and aspirations for their lives painted upon them.

### Industry and Resourcefulness for Livelihood and Economy

Laoageños seized the chance to gain financial security as soon as kalesas were utilized as a means of public transportation. Since then, it has helped the majority of kutseros and their families greatly by providing a reliable



source of income. The emergence of these kalesas as an agent of improved accessibility has been especially beneficial to Laoag's economic growth, as it is the center for trade and transactions. The seasonality of passengers is the main issue facing the kalesa industry. Those whose daily needs are met by the kalesa are consequently left with unstable incomes (Mailed & Belizar, 2004).

According to Mr. Randy Domingo, president of the Kalesa Operators Association, "the majority of today's kutseros are successors and inheritors of the first ever kutseros of the Laoag." They are proud to be the offspring of these industrious kutseros who once grew the Kalesa industry in the town and have now turned into the main drivers of the Laoag economy's expansion.

"Panagkalesa" was more than just a means of subsistence for these kutseros; it was also a miraculous boon. Back then, it was difficult to make ends meet, but because of panagkalkalesa, they were able to live a life that was considerably better than being a street beggar. The same feelings apply to the present generation of kutseros, who work hard for their families as well. They want to carry on the panagkalkalesa heritage that has been passed down to them because it has been very important to their family. The kutseros said:

"Ti panagkalesa iti kaa-alistwan nga pagsarakan iti pag-biyagan idi. Umanayen nga addaan ti anus ken pigsa tapno makapagprovide iti pamilya. Gapu kadetoy, naipas-pasa iti agsasaruno nga henerasyon ti pam pamilya mi iti panagkal-kalesa. Ti kinagpasuwanan na, dagitoy daduma nga us usaren mi nga kalesa ket sipud pelang idi isuda ket nagrugi nga agkalesa. Isu nga dakkel a tulong ti panagkalkalesa iti pam- pamilya mi.

"Kalesa was the most accessible way to securing ends before. As long as you have the patience and determination, you can already help provide for your family. Because of this, the tradition of panagkalkalesa was passed to almost every generation of our families. In fact, most of these kalesas we're using are from our ancestors passed down to us. That is why Panagkalkalesa is indeed a huge help in our families."

### Collective Values Reflective of a Unique Laoageño Culture

The issues faced by the older generations had numerous answers thanks to Kalesa's existence. But it also presented difficulties at the same time. Kutseros in Laoag faced difficulties as a result of the introduction, adaptation, and use of Kalesa, which replaced traditional modes of transportation with motorized vehicles.

It's no longer as successful as it once was. Nevertheless, Kalesa's voyage through Laoag and the lifestyles of Laoagenos have highlighted their individual personalities, setting them apart from other communities.

### As mentioned by the Respondents (Common Laoageños)

"Ti Kalesa ket parte iti biag dagiti Laoageñosen. Sipud pay idi han pay nga siyudad ti Laoag, ken haan pay nga

kastuy a kaprogreso ti Laoag, ada dagiti kalesan. Kadwa dagiti Laoageños ti kalesa nga pimmasdas ti amin a subok ti biag mi akas maysa nga komunidad. For short, isuda ket naging witness nu ken naging karamay, aglalo kadagiti kutseros mi."

"As Laoageños, Kalesa has already been part of our life. These Kalesas have been here long before Laoag developed into a city or became what it is now. Kalesas supported our community as we faced many obstacles in life. In short, these kalesas have always been there for us, especially for our kutseros."

There is no denying that Laoageños are practical, hardworking, dedicated, resilient, preserving, adaptive, and persistent people. All of these can be reflected by how they supported their families, persevered through the disastrous shift in transportation, and managed to stand their ground in the face of urbanization and industrialization. Laoageños have demonstrated that they are hardy and will try their hardest to avoid defeat.

### Iconic Fusion of Hispanic-Filipino Cultural Heritage

One of the locations in the Philippines where Kalesas have been preserved is Laoag. Their community had interacted with these kalesas on a regular basis and undoubtedly became a part of their lives. Everyone, regardless of one's social status has profited greatly from their existence, including kutseros, regular passengers, businesses that have utilized them for transportation, and technically everyone else.

Serving the Laoageños was the one thing Kalesas accomplished for them. Regardless of social status—rich or poor—kalesas have been of immeasurable assistance to everyone. Although their fundamental function as a means of transportation has changed, their continuous existence nevertheless seeks to benefit people—albeit in a new way. That's why they are still in business. These Kalesas now represent the legendary culture and legacy of Laoag. Since these were genuinely a representation of Laoageño tradition and a treasure passed down from Laoag's ancestors.

### Tourism Identity in the Modern Era

One of the city's main priorities for expanding and strengthening its economy is tourism. The City Tourism office unveiled a new logo that features the collected distinctive emblems of their city as part of their recent endeavor to increase tourism.



Figure 2: The City of Laoag's Tourism Logo.

Their strategy is centered on emphasizing what makes Laoag unique from the province's neighboring towns. Their goal is to highlight the additional things in their town that can be observed, experienced, learned, and valued.

While it is true that motorized cars have replaced kalesas as the king of the roads, in Laoag these roadside legends continue to operate as if they had never encountered the difficulties of urbanization and modernization. They are still in the area providing the same services that they have been providing to the Ilokano community ever since it was originally introduced. And the reason kalesa has survived these difficult times is because to the tireless work of the dedicated kutseros as well as the unwavering support of the Laoageños and their government.

Perhaps the Laoageños no longer use these kalesas for the same purposes now. However, these kalesas still continue to serve their city and contribute to the growth of its economy by serving as a symbol of their town's identity.

### The Present Status of the Kalesa Industry in Laoag City

The city of Laoag is home to locations with historical significance, institutional structures, and a venue for various events. This town has long since maintained its culture and arts, particularly its Kalesas, a legacy that has endured despite urbanization and modernity. Although things have already changed, the Laoageños are nonetheless appreciative that the current generation was able to inherit the tradition of "Panagkalesa", which for them meant a great deal.

Although the tourism industry and concerned individuals have enabled Kalesa to continue providing services to the Laoageños, the constant obstacles posed by increased urbanization and industrialization appear to be gradually erasing Kalesa as an entity.

According to the President and the members of the Laoag Kalesa Operators (2024), in addition to the ongoing challenges of urbanization and modernity, which they feel they have managed to address in some way, the global pandemic of 2020 truly signaled the start of their real challenges.

"Nakalukluksaw ta detuy napasamak nga pandemic iti usto nga nangted iti challenge kanyami nga agkalkalesa. Idi bago nga agpandemic, 180 amin ti kalesas ditoy laoag. Ngem gapu iti pandemic, narigat ti biyag ken awan pagsarakan, napilitan ti kaadwan nga ilako da dagiti kal kalesa da. Isu nga idi nagsublin iti panagkalesa, 23 kami langen a nagsubli. Isu nga nu mapansin yo ket bassit langen iti agpasapada nga kalesa ditoy laoag."

"We Kutseros find it quite depressing that the pandemic changed everything for us. There were 180 kalesas in Laoag prior to the worldwide pandemic. Due to the fact that life seemed to have stopped and there were no other means of support at that time, several of us were forced to sell our kalesas in order to survive. That's why we were only 23 when we returned. If you've ever observed, that's the cause for our decline in numbers."

This regrettable incident worried the City Government of Laoag and the Provincial Government of Ilocos Norte. For this reason, the Ilocos Norte Tourism Office included Kalesas in their recovery initiatives, and were given a project name called the "Lighted Kalesa Evening Tour."

Provincial tourism officer Aianree Raquel said: "The kalesa lighted evening tour is something that we have been working (on) for a while now as part of our tourism and economic recovery programs. The design includes a metal frame attached to the kalesa to make it attractive to the riding public." He also added that this project is one of the government's mandate to provide balance between modernization and the protection of heritage and the livelihood derived from it.

While the government's efforts are recognized and valued, the Kutseros find it hard to accept that certain community members, particularly the auto-drivers, have the opposite intention. The Kutseros spoke about their experiences on the Laoag roads:

"Ada dagiti times nga maka encounter kami ti drivers ditoy laoag nga pagsaw-an dakami, kada ibaga da kanyami nga apay adakami pelang ditoy kalsada ti Laoag? Ti pay nakasaksakit keta da pay mangibga nga dapat awan kami nga kalesan kasi pasal- sali kami langen. Ket agitoy ti maysa nga permi mangsakit iti rik rikna mi nga agkalkalesa."

"Sometimes we would come across drivers who would swear and even ask us why Kalesas continue to travel on Laoag's roads. Even worse was the advice to simply stop this tradition since it is burdening Laoag with traffic. And for us Kutseros, this one hurts so much."

These kutseros have described how certain individuals made them feel excluded and unwelcome on the streets that they formerly regarded as their home. Furthermore, this scenario occurred numerous times rather than just once.

Moreover, when the kutseros were asked about the current situation of Kalesa industry in Laoag, they replied with:

"Haan kami nga siguradon, ngem inot inoten nga mapukpukaw. Han mi man kayat, ngem isu iti kinagpayswanan na a mapaspasamak. Isu nga sapayla kuma ta tulungan dakami, ket han tayo nga ipalubos nga tuluyanen nga mapukaw dagitoy kalesa tayo ditoy Laoag."

"It's clearly dying, but we're not sure anymore. Even though it isn't what we want, it is the reality. We therefore hope that you will all assist us in keeping this Laoag custom alive."

As to the common Laoagenos: "Han mi pay ketdi unay mapan-pansinen dagiti kalesa ta mesmesa nga talaga iti location nga nakapanan dan. Unlike idi nga agkaywarang da. Kadetuy pelang nga observation, makunan nga kasla mat-matayen daytoy nga tradition iti Laoag. Isu nga sapayla kuma, uray kasano ka progreso iti siyudad ket han to latta mapukaw dagitoy nga kalesa ta dagitoy ket parten iti biyag mi nga Laoagenos ken nagbalinen nga icon mi akas maysa a komunidad."

"I believe that kalesas have already been relocated to a single area, so we are unable to even determine if

they exist at all. as opposed to earlier, when they were sporadically visible. This finding alone leads one to the conclusion that the Laoag tradition appears to be dying down. Therefore, we hope that these kalesas—which have already shaped our lives and represent a distinctive sign of our community as Laoageños—won't be lost or erased, no matter how developed and refined Laoag becomes.

#### As to instructors in Culture and Arts Education

“Umuna amin siguro ket masapol tayo accepten nga daytoy nga tradition tayo ket talaga met nga mapukpukawan for so many reasons. Usto nga ada dagiti proyekto ti gobyerno para kanyada, ngem ti kinagpayswanan na ket haan tayo mabalin nga iasa amin kadakwada iti success na agitoyn nga proyekto. Ada latta parte tayo akas maysa nga komunidad. Isu sapay la kuma ta makita met dagiti pada nga Laoageños nga nu ada man iti makaysalakan ti panakapukaw dagiti kalesa, awan sabalin nu dakami metlng nga pada nga Laoageño. And on my part as a teacher in culture and the arts, han nak agtalna nga mangipromote ken mangi advocate iti amin amin nga heritage tayo nga ilokanos.”

“Initially, I believe it is vital that we acknowledge the fact that this tradition is gradually vanishing for numerous causes. True, the government has started initiatives for these kalesas, but we can't count on them to carry out every task necessary to make these initiatives successful. Every Laoageño should understand that we are the only ones who can prevent this tradition from fading, as we all play a part in it as a community. I will not cease supporting and fighting for all of our Ilocano heritages in the meantime as a teacher of culture and the arts.”

#### CONCLUSION

The Kalesa industry in Laoag has evolved from a means of transportation for The Kalesa industry in Laoag evolved from nobility transportation to public transportation for the community. Despite being replaced by motorized vehicles, this tangible heritage continues to be vital, now thriving through the tourism sector.

Kalesa, a livelihood carriage in Laoag City, has transformed the landscape and community, adding local colors and reflecting the artistic, skilled, hardworking, and resilient Laoageños. It is an iconic culture and heritage, showcasing the unique characteristics of the Laoageño community and their distinctive Ilokano character.

The Kalesa has remained steadfast despite modernization efforts. However, due to the global pandemic, the number of kalesa decreased significantly from 180 to 23. This indicates a near-phase-out scenario for the Kalesa industry, and as kutseros feel outnumbered and unwelcome by many Laoageños, particularly motorists, who want this mode of transportation to end, indicating the decline of the Kalesa heritage.

As Cruz (2017) quoted in the study of Robles (2021), the kalesa held the title of “King of the Road” for a

number of years, until the jeepney's introduction during the American era. Without the kalesa, Philippine culture and life would never be the same. It is an important part of Philippine history that should never be overlooked. Despite the difficulties of modernization, the kalesa will always provide a special kind of transportation that is inherently friendly which brings back the frenzy of the past.

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