

Berasik Healing Ritual Performance: Illness Etiology Perspectives amongst Bajau Sama Natives Practices

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Abstract

Sabah is one of Malaysia state that rich in ethnic diversity, art and culture. This diversity varies in uniqueness in the practices and beliefs that are shared among the people during the period of origin. Starting from the history of animistic appeal until the evolution of religious consent, most Malaysians practice different beliefs and remedies based on the inheritance of their ancestors. Since then, various customs that are practiced by hereditary that affect the things in daily life has been born. The customs and inheritance that is practiced influence in all aspects of social life that are fixed to the values of beliefs held. One of them is the healing belief that is practiced by the Bajau Sama native in the hinterland of Sabah. Practice in each area is different and has a unique tradition. Few examples of healing belief that is embodied and practiced by the people of Sabah are *ngalai*, *kok ta'un*, *igal*, *melabuh ajung* and etcetera. Practices in each locality and tribe are different and have a unique sense of tradition. Therefore, this study will focus on a ceremony of healing ritual known as *berasik* among the Bajau Sama tribe in Kampung Beliajung, Kota Marudu located on the West Coast (North) of Sabah. The *berasik* is a form of special performances practiced only by the Beliajung villagers. In fact, it is a healing practice that couples several elements of performances such as role play, music and *ngalai*. This study was conducted by ethnographic method intend to understand the discourse of healing presentations among the community in order to understand the culture practiced. This study will also exemplify the practices and beliefs associated with the etiology of sedated diseases in order to preserve and uplifting the heritage as a world intangible heritage gazette.

Key word: Berasik, ngalai, ritual, performance, healing, cultural, heritage, ceremony, Bajau Sama, Sabah

INTRODUCTION

Sabah is a state located in the west coast of Malaysia with the total land mass of nearly 73,620 square kilometres, divided into seven divisions: namely; East Coast, West Coast, Keningau, Tawau, Lahad Datu, Beaufort and Sandakan. This impressive fact also implies that significant cultural and

ethnic diversity as well as traditional arts can have expected to be found within its boundaries; notably the indigenous healing practices among native tribes in the rural areas. This practice is evidently diverse and unique throughout the region, based on their traditional belief systems respectively. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe the ritual healing practices known as *berasik* among the Bajau Sama tribe in Kampung Belianjung, Kota Marudu, situated in the west coast of Sabah. *Berasik* is a specific healing ritual practice that only being practice by the local which incorporate a few ritual elements such as role-play, music and *ngalai*.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Apparently, the diverse ethnics of Malaysia reflect a multicultural environment, which has influenced the emergence of different kind of arts and performance relevant to various beliefs and tradition. The society beliefs and rituals from the animism religion until the entrance of the world religion has contributed in shaping the community. As a result, there are many types of traditional healing method in Malaysia. Despite the difference between regions and province, they share the same beliefs. Healing rituals is a cultural heritage that is intangible and dismissed. Assimilation form the ethnic diversity disregard of beliefs and customs has turned Malaysia into a nation that promotes a variety of cultural heritage. This heritage is an emblem and identity of particular ethnic and undeniably, it has been a pillar that creates the identity of the nation. Heritage comprises of two categories; tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage and both need to be preserved and conserved. According to Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman (2017) heritage also means the properties that become the honour and identity of a nation who own it. The existence of cultural heritage in Malaysia underwent a long history process that derived from the national mainstream image. It has become an inheritance for ages, therefore creating the sense of belonging among Malaysian. According to Abdul Aziz Hussin (2011), UNESCO¹ has taken the responsibility to hold the Convention of Word Heritage on 16 November 1972, which aims to enhance the organisation for the international cooperation towards the culture and heritage protection. Clearly, the world heritage will conceivably vanish because of the depreciation and disappearance of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage need to be conserved and preserved, therefore world heritage fund has been established during the convention under Article 15 in order to protect the world heritage as well as culture that is invaluable to the universe.

The Bajau people are one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah possessing variety art and cultural heritage which unfortunately been denied in the main stream. Hundreds of cultural and art heritages have been concealed from the outside community. One of them is healing ritual heritage by Bajau Sama in Kampung Beliajung, Sabah. The practice is one of the cultural heritage that is intangible and ignored. Not only the Bajau Sama ethnic is overlooked, but also all the arts and cultural heritage are neglected. Thus, *berasik* has been chosen to be the main

¹ Ninth UNESCO Convention in New Delhi on 1956, *International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property* (ICCROM) has received the acknowledgement for the guidance of the conservation of cultural heritage. It is crucial to state that ICCROM has been established officially in Rome on 1959. It is the first government medium organisation in the world that possess the authority to promote the conservation of heritage. The main goal of its establishment is to improve the level of preservation and educate the community on the awareness of the heritage preservation.

subject for this study. It aims to display the sustainability of the art heritage while augmenting the understanding about it specifically the heritage dominated by Bajau ethnic. Mohd. Salleh Tun Haji Mohd. Said (2005) asserts that the Bajau/Sama community in Sabah today also known as Bajau or Sama. In a few places, there are terms like Samai, Samal, Bajjau, Badjaw or others. All terms bring the same meaning. Any of these terms refers to the same community. The terms of Bajau categorized by outsiders. Bajau community called themselves as *Bangsa Sama*. *Bangsa* in Bajau community is not the race in Malay Language but it refers to the tribe.

Recently, researchers study Bajau arts and culture and for their research purpose, they classified Bajau Community into two category, which is *Bajau Laut* and *Bajau Darat*. Bajau Darat consists of the native of land terrain especially West Coast of Sabah, Kota Belud; known as Sama Tempasuk. While, Bajau Laut refers to those who lived at the coastline especially East Coast, Semporna; and called Sama Kuvang. This category has never existed for Bajau community. They usually known based on their origin or village.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Bajau Sama in Kampung Belianjung, Sabah adapts *berasik* ritual healing practice as one of the alternative medication in the society. It is a healing belief that has been practiced for many generations, therefore become a culture in the alternative healing involving treating diseases that cannot be identified by scientific method. The healing ritual is conduct by a woman shaman and done with the presence of the community members. Parallel with the science and technology development, the urban community seems to diminish the healing ritual. However, modern medical treatment also fails to heal mysterious diseases that cannot be detect by modern medical apparatus. Ismail C. Charles (2003) claims that in the point of view of Sabah Malay, mysterious disease is known as loosing of spirit (*hilang semangat*). Local community generally believes that the spirit must be return to the owner. Failing to do so will bring the worst consequences, where the stolen spirit will be influence by other evil spirit (*terkena*) and worsen the illness. In Sabah, it is common to see two shamans performing the healing process simultaneously and it is ongoing for few consecutive nights. Thus, traditional healing becomes the alternative medical attention amongst the tribe. However, the problem that needs to be determine is why the *berasik* healing method should be consider as insignificant in the modern context of life? What is actually *berasik* and what is the value to local community?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To ensure that *berasik* ritual healing performance is recognize as one of the intangible cultural heritage, a more holistic study associate with the tribal culture and community is required. Many do not know about the heritage and the culture that practiced by Bajau Sama community. However, the practice in every village and district is varied. Even in the same ethnic, there are still different practice in each district based on the beliefs and customs. Although there is practice that has the same purpose, the term of arts and heritage are also differ according to own trajectory. This factor has caused the unique practice between the various regions. Therefore, this study will focus on ritual healing performance that known as *berasik* in Kampung Beliajung di Kota Marudu. The objective of this study is to identify basic ritual performance and disease etiology, which cured

by *berasik* ritual. This study aims to educate the community about culture and beliefs of Bajau Sama ethnic in Kampung Beliajung while sustaining arts heritage that is practice as cultural gazette in ritual performance as an intangible heritage. Perhaps, this research will lead a motivation to the younger generation in order to conserve the extinct heritage. With a cultural understanding, acceptance of racial culture will increase in order to foster harmony and mutual respect between races and beliefs.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted ethnography method to collect the empirical data about certain community and their culture. According to Scott, J et al. (2009) the term ethnography often used to clarify the direct observation about social group behaviour and came out with written explanation about it. Despite known as fieldwork, it also often related to the social anthropology research technique. Sociologists that involved in the community research will implement fieldwork especially in the study case. The main technique of ethnography research is participant observation technique. Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman (2017) convinced that this research is trying to understand and separate the emic perspective by clarifying a cultural phenomenon through the studied community perspective. Data collections through observation. While the field interviews were done with the participants.

According to Malinowski (2002), ethnography research is a research that trying to understand the aborigine perspective. Thus, this research related to life and its relation of particular community and their lives. Ethnography research considered as a research method that is very basic in social and anthropology research. This research gives written explanation about each cultural heritage that involved custom, beliefs, practice, behavior based on the information that gathered from the fieldwork. This study is a descriptive research on cultural and sub-culture that covers an institution or community. After gathering data from the ritual observation, a serial of interviews will be carried out among those who involved in the ritual to identify the convention and structure that is presented during the ritual. Library research has also been done to collect the primary data. The result will analyze and enhance the findings through structuralism that emphasize the whole relation between the variety of elements and arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hairudin Harun (1992) did mentioned it is clarified that before the emergence of science or mechanical physic in Europe in 17 century, all people including in Western countries belief that in the living phenomena, there is a spirit or soul or dynamic process in it. The beliefs go beyond Malay world. However, animism faded away with the advent of Hinduism, one of the earliest religion in Tanah Melayu. Drs. Jihaty Abadi et al. (1984) response that historical research has shown the influence of Hinduism in Malay world and the religion being spread since the first century. R.O. Winstedt has given proof of Hinduism artifacts that appeared in few parts of Malay world. The examples given refers to the statue and Pallave writings from Coromandel beach, which was developed in the fourth century, and a number of Borneo artifacts, as well as Siva inscription which was found in Indochina and Kedah. Nonetheless, there are lot of changes after the arrival of Islam.

Malay has changed the animism cosmology, but the beliefs of spiritual still exist amongst Malay particularly in the practice related to disease treatment, ritual, and healing.

Laderman (1993) argued Cuisinier and Endicott opinion based on recorded material in 1936 regarding Malay ritual where he sees that a wide discussion about Malay beliefs, illness treatment, and healing. Cuisinier focused on dramatic aspect and symbolic in the ritual method and shamanistic that presented while looking for arrangement in parallelism Malay shaman between universe macro aspect and human micro cosmos. However the discussion through knowledge growing in 1951, he once again discussed abstract ideas outside Malay mind ability. He believes the main key that hold the universe together is the spirit that has the strength to percolate to all creation like stone, plants, animals and etcetera. This is different from Endicot record on 1970 that used both previous descriptive essay, which claimed that the fundamental content of Malay magic is manipulation and border arrangement between spirit and things. From this comparison, it is a clear indication that social and cultural anthropologists in 1960 and 1970 prioritized human relationship, which refer to human with human and human with spirit. They explained how shamanic ritual exposed the indisputable social interaction and thinking structure, beliefs, as well as values in Malay community.

Looking at the ritual in this study, Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman (2017) declared, healing ritual performance in Sabah is so unique, which covers a multiple arts (*ngalai*). Arts elements (*ngalai*) on its own is not significance and only meaningful in the relationship whether association or opposition. The relationship that is learned is also related in micro (acts, speech) widen as a whole (structure, function, meaning of creation) or cross discipline (social, economy, politics in certain era). Consequently, the basic structuralism theory concept is about the role of the elements in the engraving the whole and its relationship functionally between those elements.

UNESCO proclamation of cultural heritage has arisen since 1989. In *International Conference 'A Global Assessment of the 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore: Local Empowerment and International Cooperation'*, the persistence of the heritage has been proposed. UNESCO beliefs that intangible cultural heritage must be relevant to its community and transmitted from one generation to another. The impression that cultural heritage could be retained without proper safeguarding is arguable.

It needs protection but not to the extent to freeze the intangible cultural heritage in the absolute or primordial form. Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is about the transferring of knowledge, skills and meaning. Transmission or handing over the heritage from generation to generation was reiterated in the convention. Intangible heritage is distinct from concrete manifestation like dance, songs, musical instruments, or craft; it is exclusive. Thus, on the particular level, protection is the referred to the enhancement and remaining variety of situation and variation that is real and inexisted is needed for evolution and continuous interpretation for the next generation.

ETIOLOGY OF ILLNESS IN *BERASIK* RITUAL HEALING

The normal healing process for the real disease in the village around Malaysia involved the usage of natural remedy from plants and animals. As described by the local informant, Azman bin Abdul Rahman (2017), in the origin belief, disease that is unidentified usually involved magic. In Bajau Sama community, belief and culture of magic is still pertinent. Correspondingly, there is still an appeal for the healing ritual like *berasik*. According to Ghulam Sarwar Yousof (2014), sometimes people faced a very complex ritual to execute exorcism to heal the stolen soul/spirit (*semangat*). It is to strengthen the weak soul through magic or to rebuild the harmony in people with disturb (*semah angin*). The ritual involve trance. Generally, presented by dance like shamanic *main puteri/teri* for ritual that is often practice in the east coast. However, in *berasik*, the movement in the form of *ngalai* is accompanied by *kulintangan* music.

Berasik is a Bajau Sama custom healing ritual in Kampung Belianjung, Kota Marudu, Sabah. The word *berasik* define by the local as a ritual that unites people with metaphysic like spirit or genie. The term *berasik* is originated from local words that related to betel palm blossom (*mayang pinang*) which is being used to entertain genie or spirit during the healing process by making the forecast. The healing process begin with opening ritual act where the serving (*berjamu*) is prepared by *bergimbaran* to treat the genie or spirit. *Bergimbaran* is the local term refer to shaman who led the *berasik* ritual. *Bergimbaran* negotiated between the patient and the genie or spirit in order to cure the illness.

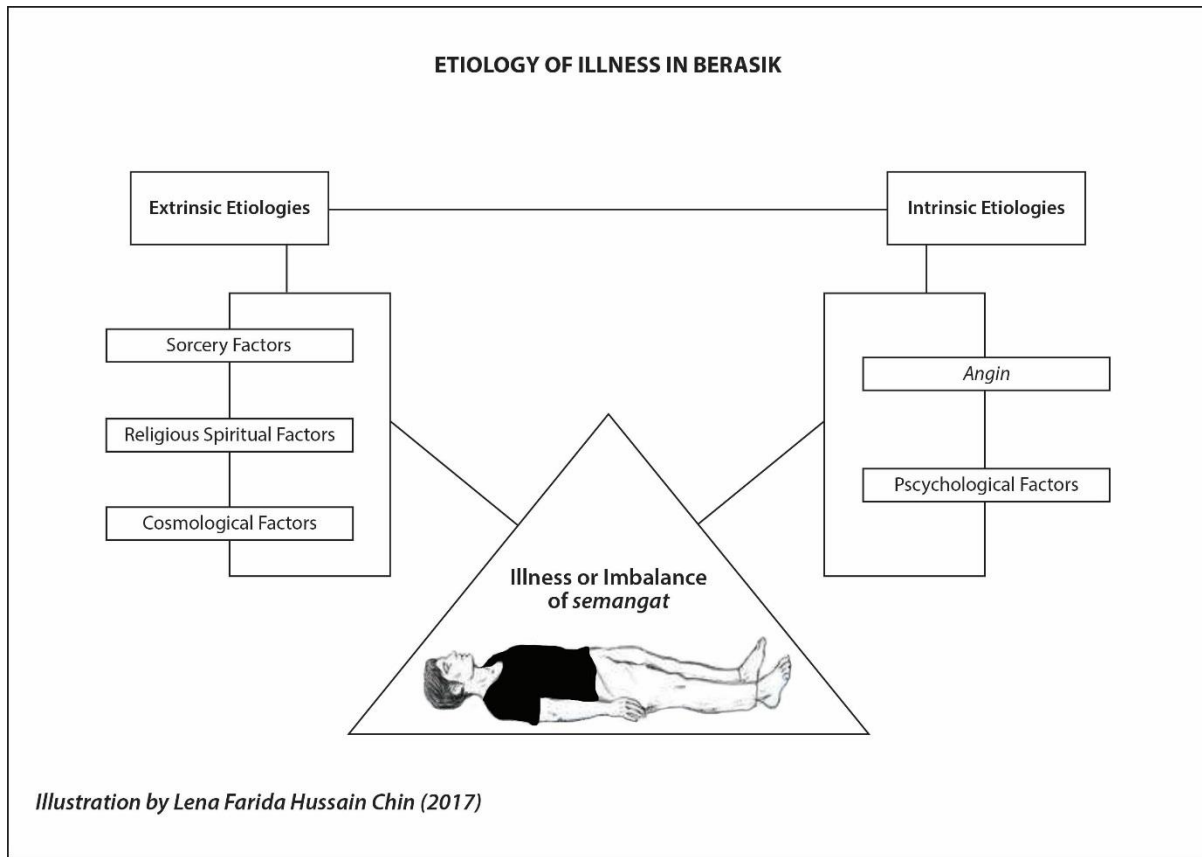


Diagram 1: Etiology of Illness in *Berasik*

Diagram 1 explain the etiology of illness which be treated by *berasik* ritual. From the interview carried out, Uyung binti Berapik (2017) explained about the cause factors. The first etiology is intrinsic etiology whereby the diseases due to three external factors. First factor is sorcery (black magic), second is religious spiritual and third is cosmological factors. Subsequently, the second etiology is the ntrinsic etiology, which involved wind (*angin*) and phycological factors. By looking at both kind of ethiology, it is obvious that Malays beliefs today are influenced by traditional belief that occured from various influence such as historical and assimilation beliefs and their ancestors religion; and this has influence the native life who live farthest from development. Hamid et al. (2013), Wan Faizah Wan Yusuff argued that Western colonialization in Africa and Asia has created western domination not only in economical structure, political and local sociocultural but also in the medical treatment. Western medical structure that accentuate hospital services by using medicine like tablet and treatment method like operation has shown obvious difference with traditional treatment method which is influence by beliefs and cultural factors.

Among Southeast Asian community, especially Malay in the era before independence, beliefs that based on spiritual elements, customs, and religion were dominant in the traditional treatment system. However, these beliefs have been instilled long time in the community.

According to Wright (1851), since the glorious of religion, Roman pope has never demolished the belief and healing practice involving the ancestors in the west. This has made the beliefs, influence of this practice flourish, and widen in the life contexts, which emphasize the power of magic that influence the development in harassing the serenity of the community. In this context, we can see that this belief only bring a bad influence, but has became the healing practice. Hornienal, when the disease that cannot be detected or cured by any scientific method, ritual healing functionate as one of the alternative method in medication. Thus, it is be based on the beliefs like how people belief in religion and god. In the interview, Jali bin Jali (2017) admitted that many patient that came to seek for the *berasik* healing service are those who had suffered the illness for so long. Among the cases that cannot be cured by the modern treatment has being proven healed by the ritual healing methods were stroke, sorcery (black magic), spirit possession, unknown illness or any common disease.



Back to the *berasik* ritual healing practice, picture 1 shows the main *bergimbaran* in the *berasik* ritual performance is holding a ritual healing. *Bergimbaran* playing the role as a shaman that become the mediator between the genie and the spirit in healing the patient.

II. Structure of ritual performance (ritual performance (*berjamu*)) in *berasik* In traditional healing ritual, serving

(*berjamu*) is an obligation due to serve to arouse the interaction with the spirit or the therefore realize the wellness process.

Picture 1: *Bergimbaran* 1 Uyun binti Berapik starts the *berasik* ritual

the belief that the food is communication and entity that cannot be seen

According to Ghulam Sarwar Yousof (2016) *serving (berjamu)* is a ritual that is challenging and generally held for the purpose of enticement of the invisible spirit or other creature; that generally accompanied regular illness in traditional genre theatre. For instance, *serving* in Peninsular Malaysia is using the same method and it perceptible in *mak yong*, *menora* or *wayang kulit* in Kelantan, and *mek mulung* in Kedah. *Serving (berjamu)* in peninsular Malaysia is known as beach worship (*puja pantai*) or a specific ritual to cajoule the ocean soul (ghost or genie). There are complicated demand in *serving* ritual performance (*berjamu*) other than chanting (*mantera*) and regular performance like in the lower *semah* entourage. It involves animals sacrifice like cows, buffalos and goats that is believe to be offer to the unseen entity, which is similar to *berasik* concept.

Findings from the observation synthesis and interview, there are three parts of *serving (berjamu)* in *berasik*. Picture 2 shows the materials for the first ritual performance (*berjamu*) before the ritual ceremony. It involved particular dishes that is a requisite to complete the introduction of the healing ritual. Materials that are



Picture 2: Parts of material for ritual performance (*berjamu*)

identified at the first phase are yellow, red and green cloth, *batik*, cleaning water, candle, eggs, water, turmeric rice (*beras kunyit*), *penjaram* cake, garlic, fan, as well as betel palm blossom (*mayang pinang*).

Second parts are materials be used for ritual performance (*berjamu*) by *bergimbaran* during the rite is added on second or third session of the ritual. Materials consist of a container fill with flaming charcoal and a container filled with water, which hidden at corner of the house, while the third container is filled with blood and parts of black rooster that has been torn and placed in a container at the house entrance. Flaming charcoal chewed by the second *bergimbaran* who is a man that play a role as *Tuk Minduk*² during the ritual. Typically, in the *berasik* ritual, all shamans involved whether as a main healer or a medium called as *bergimbaran*. To convince that the second *bergimbaran* is in subconscious condition, he will chew the flaming charcoal in front of the crowd. Other than chewing the flaming charcoal, second *bergimbaran* will also consume completely the black rooster and its blood. Refer Picture 3. Beliajung society believes to be capable of heal; the second *bergimbaran* will be possessed by the spirit of the patient in the period of *menurun*³ (trance) until at the end of the healing process. Finally, the spirit then ask for compensation. Local's belief that the compensation (the



Picture 3: Bergimbaran consume black rooster and its blood.

dish) is essential in order to coax the spirit anger, which according to the medium, the compensation can be in the form of reared animals like cow, goat and chicken. In the *berasik* healing process, there are a numbers of special conditions to oblige. Disobey the condition will cause the increasing amount of the compensation. The specific condition is; those who attend the first night of the ritual must attend the whole process, where replacement and compensation, which is determine by the healing spirit, is compulsory for the absentee.

III. Convensyen Placement Pattern and *Berasik* Healing Space

In diagram 1, illustrated convensyen placement pattern and *berasik* healing space based on the original healing space. The ritual is held in front of a house and the division of the healing space has been done by the first *bergimbaran*.

² Ismail Hassan (1988) describes the role of *Tuk Minduk* in the *Main Teri* ritual. *Tuk Minduk* was an intermediary with *Tuk Teri* when *Tuk Teri* was unconscious and was believed been entered by another spirit and was talking about the disease in the treated patient. Therefore, the terms *Tuk Minduk* refer as intermediary intercessors with the main shaman who are in a state of unconsciousness because of being in another world (trance) in the Malay ritual healing. This is because *Tuk Minduk* is not only in the *Main Teri* heritage, but also exists in other artistic heritage in the realm of Malay healing rituals.

³ According *Kamus Dewan Edisi 4th Ed*: in the 5th interpretation defines the inclusion of the subtle spirits into the body (the handler, the shaman, etc.), in the unconscious state and can then contact the subtle creatures (not the shaman, the handler, etc.), the way Medicinal treatments are sometimes performed by ~; I can see how the style of the person turns and ghosts.

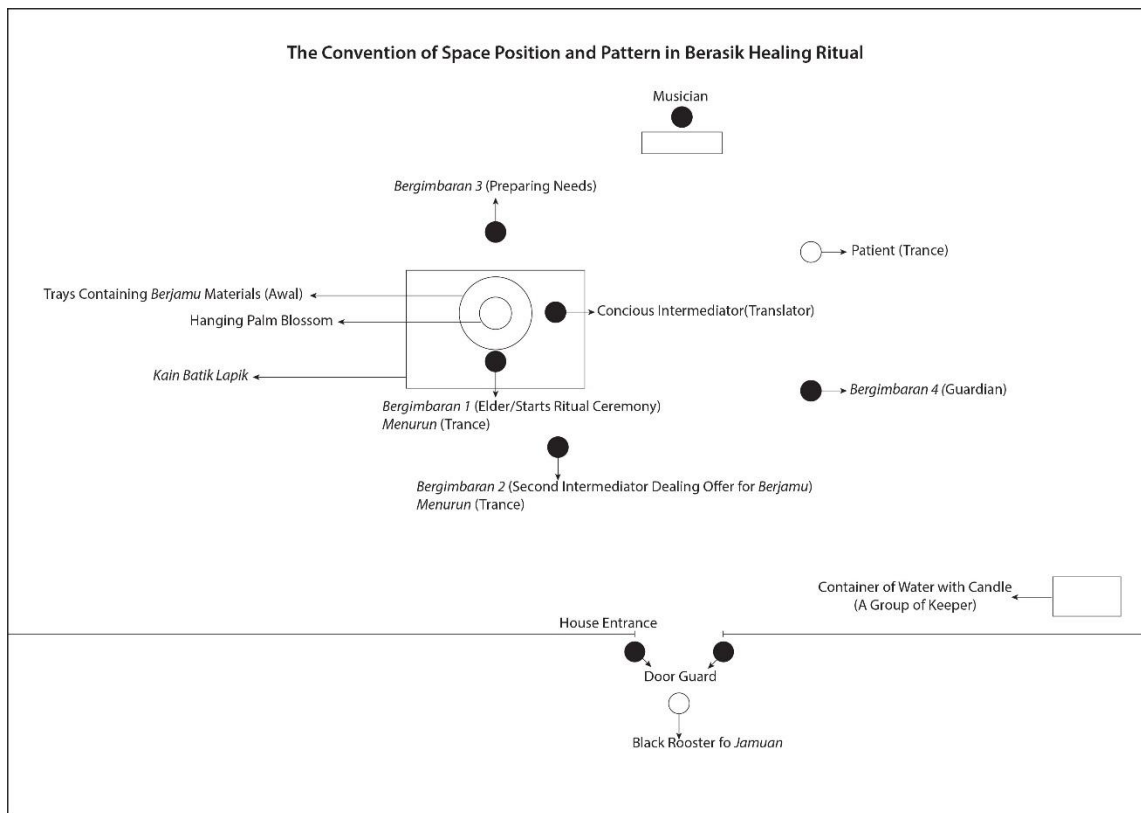


Diagram 1 shows the pattern of healing position and space in *berasik*.
Illustration by Lena Farida Hussain Chin (2017)

However, the position never been formatted or justified by the doer. The local people who attended to watch and take part as the participant in certain event during the ritual surrounded the space. Few of them acted as the guardian of the candle container in the right front corner of the house. Generally, it involves ten to fifteen male guards so first and second *bergimbaran* that has been possessed (has the supernatural power) could not get to the container. Local believe that in case the first and second *bergimbaran* managed to take the container, the healing ritual is considered failed, an as a result the patient could not be healed and must find other alternatives to cure the illness.

IV. Basic Performance Structure in *Berasik* Healing Performance

There are two main basic performance structure in *Berasik* ritual performance. First is *berasik kulintangan* music (local term) and second is *ngalai berasik*. During the healing rite, they play *kulintangan*⁴ lively. However, the music meant by the local is actually the *gabang*⁵. The musical intruments consists of few pieces of wood that can produce special rhythm to accompany the ritual. The music is played repeatedly and while the music is being played, first *bergimbaran* will

⁴ The precise term *kulintangan* is reffered to the idiophon musical instrument that is created using metal. Refer to Patricia Matusky dan Tan Sooi Beng. (2017). *The Music of Malaysia: The Classical, Folk and Syncretic Traditions*.

⁵ According to Ghulam Sarwar Yousof (2004) *gabang* is a musical instrument similar to xylofon made from wood and produce sound by being hit without the intervention of other musical instrument.

start chanting while holding the tied betel palm blossom (*mayang pinang*) and at this moment the healer is possessed by the spirit, the weak patient (also possessed) soul is called to release the wind (*angin*) to *ngalai* together and follow the sound of music. *Ngalai* between first *bergimbaran* and the patient will be ongoing until the patient able to narrate about the sickness. At this moment, the medium will give attention to the conversation involving the first *bergimbaran*, second *bergimbaran* and the patient. In the process, the disease diagnosed by the mediums and the community members who assemble will conclude based on what have been presented during the peak of the *trance* during the ritual. Laderman, C (1993) cited that Winstedt has written about attempted to tease Hindu and Sufi elements out of the shaman's seance, as well as those that he ascribed to an indigenous religion practiced by Malays before their conversion from Hinduism and later to Islam. The main point of the excerpt is about the passing of the microcosm and macrocosm relation of man and the universe. They found it in the symbolism of the Kelantan shaman's exorcism (1951). No system or unity in Malay beliefs was found when he compared to a cultural "lumber-room," despite it was full of "gracious and beautiful" items perhaps, but nevertheless carrying the distinct connotation of useless objects piled helter-skelter in no particular order. Winstedt also remind his English readers that they should lower their expectation of Malays. According to him, old-fashioned Malay minds could not comprehend systems and theories, which appeal for abstract thinking regardless of their understanding of animatism or the idea of potential power within human and in inanimate objects. For him, they are still unable to hypothesize the equality in nature; an idea is too complex for Malays language even today.

CONCLUSION

Base on the deed, practise and the society beliefs, *berasik* can be define as a primitive heritage and culture which that sustained among the Beliajung society. The findings from this study is depicted to be an instrument for the sustainment of the conservation and preservation of the intangible cultural heritage in Malaysia. It is expected to increase the identity of the nation and to constitute as one of the National Heritage as stated in the act 645 National Heritage Act 2005. Understanding of the cultural heritage of different ethnics capable to unite the community to the National Culture Policy. This study contribute to two main objectives of National Culture Policy in enhancing the unity of nation and Malaysia race by cultivating and conserving the national identity that emerged from National Culture. In the Beliajung Village, socio-economy disadvantage is clearly seen due to the lack of of industrial area in assisting to flourish the economy.

Therefore, cultural heritage can be a contributor to the local economy progress and able to generate the nation income through the development of creative industry and tourism industry. According to Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman (2017), the establishment of National Creative Industry Policy is the main policy to upgrade the creative activities to be more productive and economic based on three main scope. The three scope encompass multimedia, cultural arts and heritage that has high convincing as the income generator and open the wide working advantage that suggest the retention of nation cultural acts

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