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Conservation of the *Ngalai/Berasik* Ritualistic Performance of Bajau/Sama' Ethnic Group for Sustainable Intangible Heritage

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Abstract

The ritualistic performing arts of *ngalai/berasik* practised by the ethnic group of Bajau/Sama' in Sabah that serves as a healing medium in the traditional context has become more and more marginalised by the generation today. Traditionally, the ritual of *ngalai/berasik* is a performance practice that is used for healing. The ritualistic performance based on the belief of animism is one emerged from human action or desire to find a relationship with the metaphysical or the supernatural because naturally, humans have their own religious emotion. The objective of this study is to highlight the reasonability for preserving the ritualistic performing arts of *ngalai/berasik* as an intangible heritage in the form of unique ritualistic performing arts. This study applies the ethnographic method to understand the relationship between the behavior and culture through the observation towards the informants. It is hoped that the study outcome will justify the ritual of *ngalai/berasik* as performing arts in the form of intangible heritage so that it continues to be significant in the current context for the sustainability of the cultural heritage.

Keywords: Ngalai/Berasik, Bajau/Sama', Intangible Heritage, Sustainability, Conservation

Background

The ritualistic performing arts of *ngalai/berasik* has been the practice of Bajau/Sama' for the purpose of healing. The ethnic group of Bajau/Sama' in Sabah today is generally known as Bajau or Sama'. In several places, there are other terms like Samai, Samal, Bajjau, Badjaw and others. All these terms carry the same meaning. Any of these terms can be applied because it can refer to the same community. For general knowledge, the different terms of Bajau are categorized by outside communities, whereas the ethnic group of Bajau itself calls themselves as the People of Sama'. The nation implied by the Bajau people does not refer to the 'nation' in the Malay Language but instead it refers to the people of ethnicity¹. However, there are many people from the outside community who study about arts and culture of the Bajau people. Thus, to facilitate the study, they have classified the people of Bajau/Sama' generally to two categories namely Sea Bajau (*Bajau Laut*) and Land Bajau (*Bajau Darat*). *Bajau Darat* comprises of the land inhabitants

especially in the West Coast of Sabah centered in Kota Belud. They are known as *Sama' Tempasuk*. Meanwhile, the Sea Bajau refers to those living in the shore, especially in the East Coast of Sabah centered in Semporna. They are called *Sama' Kuvang*. However, for the Bajau people themselves, the category of division does not exist. They are commonly known according to their origins or their hometowns.

Thus, this study concentrates on the ritualistic performing arts practiced by the ethnic group of Bajau/Sama' (*Bajau Darat*) which is the largest ethnic in the district of Kota Belud and Kota Marudu, Sabah. Kota Belud is a district with the largest population of Bajau/Sama' compared to other districts. This is because Bajau/Sama' is said to have come from this district even before the world war took place. The Bajau/Sama' community in Kota Belud worked in the agricultural field in their daily economic activities. Meanwhile, the ethnic Bajau/Sama' in Kota Marudu is a combination of the Sea Bajau and the Land Bajau. However, in terms of the custom and the culture, the Bajau/Sama' still hold on to the same regulation as those imposed to their ancestors. These include the customs of eating, bathing, marriage, feasting, even the belief towards their surroundings that are also inhabited by other creatures. The goal is to safeguard their wellbeing continuously because they believe that every deed committed must be done carefully and according to the customs to avoid from evil, bad luck or *tulah*ⁱⁱ.

In line with the belief, the people of Bajau/Sama' still believe in the existence of the supernatural beings from the other world, until today. They believe that every place in this world is inhabited by other entities. They have faith in the fact that these creatures can help and can also hurt them. For the creatures who can help, respect must be given so that they are not harmed. There are also these supernatural entities that can help humans in their daily lives. According to Liang (1993), the Bajau/Sama' believes that in this world, there are many types of Djinn (supernatural creatures). The Djinn is regarded as special because it has the power and it can influence human activities. Humans can only identify with, or feel the power that absorbs into the members of the descendent or group. It has become a culture in the context of healing of the people of Bajau/Sama'. The ethnic Bajau/Sama' believes that this world is not only inhabited by humans and animals, but also by the supernatural; that influences the lives of the human beings. They believe that there are supernatural creatures who are kind and have extraordinary powers in helping to resolve human issues also evil entities that hurt and bring hardship to the people in their lives.

Stemming from this belief, the ritualistic performing arts *ngalai/berasik*ⁱⁱⁱ is created. As a performing arts, it is a combination of dancing, singing, acting and music. As this performance stems from the ritualistic ceremony of healing, the element of performance also involves the shaman, the patient and some kind of offering. This is because, the ritualistic ceremony of *ngalai/berasik* is normally carried out to cure patients with the help of supernatural entities known as *embo'-embo'*^{iv}. They are supernatural entities from the fantasy world that come to help the shaman in the treatment of *ngalai/berasik*. *Embo'-embo'* will enter the shaman's body - the person who will cure the patient believed to be infected by the *tulah* or disturbance of the supernatural (Djinn). The main function of this ritualistic ceremony of *ngalai/berasik* to find the root cause of the disease, cure the patient and suggest ways to resolve the patient's disease. The Bajau/Sama' believe that this curing method is a curing process that involves the power from other creatures. The practitioners of the ritualistic ceremony of *ngalai/berasik* believe that the physical world is influenced by the metaphysical world, where the supernatural is mythically

believed to be the souls of their ancestors referring to the animism inherited from the traditional era.

Theoretically, the significance of this study is to highlight that the existence of *ngalai/berasik* ritual which still can be viewed as a traditional performing arts with slight modification is still playing an important role in the contemporary life of Bajau/Sama' ethnic. It is still a performance that re-imitates the ritual movements and actions only that it is given a new meaning. The *ngalai/berasik* ritual performance can now be shown to the mass for entertainment, and they consist of tourists, in particular as well as for healing.

Contextually, the significance of this study is in line with the Malaysian government policy as an effort to re-elevate the traditional arts as a national heritage that needs to be conserved and learned by the contemporary generation so it will sustain. In relation to that, something that needs to be analysed in driving back the grand traditional performing arts is by offering a justification about the importance of conserving and sustaining *ngalai/berasik* as a unique performing arts in the form of intangible heritage that increases the community's integrity other than spurring national development.

Problem Statement

The ritualistic performing arts *ngalai/berasik* in the traditional context was practiced and trusted for healing purposes, among the practitioners' community. However, in the current context, the ritual is becoming more and more marginalised from the practice of Bajau/Sama' especially in Sabah. This emerging issue is caused by several factors, in which include the fact that the ethnic group of Bajau/Sama' is currently undergoing the transformation process in their daily affairs. In general, the Bajau/Sama' is experiencing a big change in terms of their lives, work, economic resources, accommodation and belief. The first factor that causes this change is the development of Islam and Christianity among the society of Bajau/Sama'. Islam and Christianity have changed the world view of the Bajau/Sama' who previously advocated animism. The emergence of both religions also changed the world view of the Bajau/Sama', especially in the aspect of cosmology that refers to the customs and belief, taboo as well as ritual ceremonies. The ritual of *ngalai/berasik* that carries the paradigm of animism from cosmology and taboo aspects is one that opposes the religious concepts of Islam and Christianity. Thus, *ngalai/berasik* is no longer significant to be presented in the current context following the change in the religious belief.

The second factor is the leap of modernity that also plagues the Bajau/Sama' among which is the aspect of education. The modern education system introduced to the Bajau/Sama' community had given birth to the new generation of Bajau/Sama. It is a generation of new thinkers who are able to think scientifically based on logic and pragmatic. This new thinking cannot accept the *ngalai/berasik* ritual as a method that can cure diseases. From there, they still believe in the modern medical method that can give a comprehensive justification for every disease suffered by the patient. Thus, the younger generation interested to learn the *ngalai/berasik* ritual practice as a method of healing is on the decrease or even non-existent. Meanwhile, the older generation is no longer capable of implementing this method due to aging. Thus, whether they like it or not, the *ngalai/berasik* ritual has to succumb to the fact that its existence as a healing ritual has come to an end.

Objective of Research

Therefore, this study attempts to identify the significance of the *ngalai/berasik* ritual from the functional aspect in the context of the current Bajau/Sama' particularly, and Malaysia generally. It is not only a medium for curing, but also serves as a cultural heritage that can increase one's self-integrity in the new Bajau/Sama' generation. As a curing medium, it is still relevant as an alternative healing method to the existing modern method. Next, this study also has the aim to preserve the *ngalai/berasik* ritual as unique performing arts in the form of intangible heritage to be made sustainable for the benefit of the future generation. This is harmonious with the passing of time, the existence of *ngalai/berasik* ritual which still can be viewed as a traditional performing arts with slight modification. It is only a performance that re-imitates the ritual movements and actions only that it is given a new meaning. The *ngalai/berasik* ritual performance can now be shown to the mass for entertainment, and they consist of tourists, in particular.

Methodology

The research discipline applies the ethnography method as a strategy. Ethnography is a research strategy that is created by anthropologists who concentrate on the relationship between behaviour and culture. Ethnographers try to understand and separate the emic from the etic perspectives. Emic means an explanation of a cultural phenomenon through the perspective of the community being studied. Etic explains a cultural phenomenon through the perspectives of the individuals not involved in the society being studied. Thus, ethnography is an effort to describe a culture. According to Malinowski (2002), the purpose of ethnography is to understand the views of the natives, their relationship with life and also obtain their views about their own world. Culture can be found in various patterns of behaviour related to the groups of society being studied. Thus, in carrying out field work, ethnographers have made the decision that culture comes from three sources, from the views of the people, from the way people act and from various artefacts the people use. The purpose of ethnography is to learn other cultures to get some knowledge that covers the technique of observation, the ethnography theory and various cultural descriptions. It also seeks to develop a systematic interpretation about all human cultures, from the perspectives of the people who learn them. Thus, gives its contribution in terms of informing people about the Cultural Bound theories, discovering the Grounded Theory, understanding the complex society, understanding human behavior and finally ethnographers collaborate with the informants to produce a cultural description.

It is asserted that the ethnography method is a convention in the arts and cultural discipline which seeks to elevate the element of objectivity in the observation. In general, the art field leans more towards the element of subjectivity. However, this does not mean that the arts field is non-academic and it can be addressed blindly. As the demand for academic observation is objectivity, the element of subjectivity must be minimised. In relation to this, the ethnography method is applied to minimise the subjectivity. The aspects involved are the relationship between ethnography and culture, language and field research, informants also research steps involving things like deciding on the informants, informants' interviews, making ethnographic notes, asking descriptive notes, doing interview analysis, making domain analysis, asking structural questions, asking contrasting questions, making component analysis, discovering cultural themes and writing ethnography.

Research Design

This study concentrates on the aspect of the conservation of the ritualistic performing arts of *ngalai/berasik* practiced by the people of Bajau/Sama' in Sabah, Malaysia as a form of culture in the intangible heritage for sustainability. Thus, the research design applies several approaches, which are:

1. Doing an interview with an informant by asking descriptive and structural questions about the *ngalai/berasik* performance to describe the entire structure of the performance. As a performing arts, *ngalai/berasik* is a combination of dance movements, singing, music and acting. This performance stems from the ritual ceremony practised by the Bajau/Samah' community in Sabah for the healing purpose. The *ngalai/berasik* ritual ceremony is believed to have existed for centuries and believed to be held to treat patients. No studies have been done on the ceremony because knowledge is lacking on the existence. *Ngalai/berasik* is normally done to treat patients with the help of supernatural entities known as *embo'-embo'*. It is the supernatural being that comes and enter the body of the shaman in the healing ceremony of *ngalai/berasik*. *Embo'-embo'* will penetrate into the body of the shaman who is the head of the *ngalai/berasik* ritual which will then treat the patient who is believed to have been sick because someone, or the Djinn has imposed evil on him or her. The main function of this ritual is to heal the patient or find the root cause and ways to resolve the issues of the patient. The ethnic group of Bajau/Sama' believes that this curing method is a process of healing involving the power from the supernatural. The *ngalai/berasik* ritual is very seldom done because the healing process is the final resort in patient treatment. This is because, the *ngalai/berasik* ritual will only be done if there is no shaman or other witchdoctors that can help cure the patients.

2. The domain and component analyses are also done towards *ngalai/berasik* to discover more cultural themes. Through these analyses, *ngalai/berasik* will be seen as a cultural heritage. Heritage, in this issue, is something that is handed down from the previous generations, or in other words, is the remnant of the ancestors or nature that needs to be preserved. Heritage also means something that is left behind, that becomes the pride and joy, also an introduction to a nation, to which he or she belongs. The existence of cultural heritage in Malaysia has undergone a long historical process based on the national mainstream image. It has long become a collective ownership and thus, it is able to create a sense of belonging among Malaysians. The heritage began with the human instinct to keep something that they have used, experienced as memorabilia and the source of nostalgia. Human curiosity towards an event, spurs them to look for weird and strange things. In general, heritage can be divided into two, namely tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible Heritage is permanent to see and it is held statically or portably, which is in the form of appearance or artifact that can be felt by a very clear and accurate touch (Kechot, et.al., 2012). In the meantime, Intangible Heritage is a heritage field that has become the priority encompassing a non-material heritage to be enjoyed by human senses. It is asserted that, Intangible Heritage means a human action or movement that can be seen, touched, tasted, smelt or heard when it is done or when it exists, but it can no longer be enjoyed when it is gone or if it has ended. National Heritage Act 2005, interprets that the Intangible Heritage is included in any form of sayings, language, tongue utterance, song produced through musics, notes, lyrics, it can be heard, singing, folks' songs, verbal tradition, poems, dancing, acting, as produced through the performing arts, theatrical performance, sound and musical composition, martial arts, that has existed, related to the Malaysian heritage or any parts of Malaysia, or related to

the heritage of Malaysians (Tourism and Culture Ministry, Malaysia, 2016). Thus, from this definition, *ngalai/berasik* is an intangible heritage in a form of the traditional performing arts.

3. Next, a structural analysis is done to affirm the meaning of culture confined in *ngalai/berasik*. The aim is to justify the reason behind the ritualistic performance arts to be preserved and sustained. The ritualistic performing arts *ngalai/berasik* is reasonable to be conserved as a form of intangible heritage following its unique function. Referring to the National Heritage Law, conservation means the effort to cure and preserve the natural resources wisely and systematically so that it will benefit the future generation. Conservation is the process of taking care of, and looking after a historical heritage from being destroyed or maintained without any systematic planning and management. The concept of the conservation of heritage accepted and practiced by mankind is "Originality in the Conservation of Heritage" (Nasron, 2016). The conservation of intangible cultural heritage according to the National Heritage Law, Act 645, Section 60 is as follows (National Heritage Law Bill, 2005), whereby (i) Owner or caretaker of the intangible cultural heritage takes all the necessary steps to develop, identify, submit, leading to the implementation and facilitation of research on the intangible cultural heritage following the guidance and system determined. (ii) The commissioner can engage in any kind of liaison with the owner or caretaker of the intangible cultural heritage for the obedience of the stipulated guideline and organization. The conservation of *ngalai/berasik* as a form of intangible heritage is important for the sake of sustainability. In relation to this issue of sustainability, it can be explained as one's capability or capacity to retain or sustain himself or herself. In other words, sustainability revolves around what we need to survive today without affecting human potential in the future to cater for their future to fulfill their requirement. This can be referred to the statement outlined by the 'World Commission on Environment and Development for the United Nations General Assembly in 1987', which is "Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Vermont Folklife Center, 2016).

In the meantime, Brundtland Commission, which is an establishment founded in 1983 to promote global sustainability also has the same view that: Sustainability, involves efforts to focus on meeting current human needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Traditionally, the sustainability paradigm encompasses the interactions between humans and the economic, social and environmental aspects of living (Scammon, 2016). Furthermore, it also touches about the cultural sustainability that is synthesized with matters related to the heritage, social and economy that 'Cultural sustainability examines ways to enhance our cultural identity and sense of place through heritage, shared spaces, public art, social capital, educational opportunities, and public policies in ways that promote environmental, economic, and social sustainability (Scammon, 2016). Thus, the study about the *ngalai/berasik* ritual is important because it is about issues related to social, economy, education and culture that need to be sustained as an important heritage for the benefit of the country and future generation and for the sake of the development of national civilization.

Literature Review

Malaysia is a country that has various cultural heritage yielded from multiple races and ethnic groups. The cultural heritage owned must be defended and maintained because it reflects one's self-integrity and symbol of the country. To understand the cultural heritage implied, one needs

to know the definition of cultural heritage. This seeks to facilitate the understanding of cultural heritage categorized based on the International Council on Monument and Site (ICOMOS) criteria under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Yusoff, et. al., 2011). Consequently, the *ngalai/berasik* comes from the ritual related to the system in the religious ceremony practiced by the Malay people since the era of animism. It is a set of patterns from actions that are normally very symbolic, like certain forms from worship, sacrifice and taboos. Rituals are created following the human desire to find a relationship with the metaphysical world, because naturally humans tend to have their own religious emotions. Metaphysics is a branch of knowledge (science) that studies about the reality of a happening or an event. This knowledge prioritises the issue of spirituality. In other words, this knowledge is a spiritual one that looks into the supernatural behind the real things, because actually, the metaphysical knowledge studies the soul. Aristotle also looks at the word metaphysics by referring to the meaning of “something outside the physical world”, where the study scope is outside the scope of physical science (Khatib, 1975). In the traditional context, performing arts is a ritual ceremony commonly used in the healing process. Thus, ritual performance is one that stems from the action or desire to look for the relationship between the metaphysical world for certain purposes, normally for the practitioners’ goodness, wellbeing and peace (Abdul Rahman, 2012).

The ritual system is also related to the existence of the physical and the metaphysics. Thus, the scope of the discussion covers the phenomenon in the space and time encompassing the physical world and the metaphysical world also the human position in the space. The relationship between the human and the universe will generate creativity and an outstanding capability to produce the work of art. It is also related to four cosmic elements, the land, the fire, the water and the wind. The work of art reflects their spirit towards the cosmology of the artist’s religious belief. The work of art created is also believed to have the spirit or soul (Abdul Rahman, 2009). In this matter, according to Abdullah (1999), be it the physical or the metaphysical world, both are mutually influential. If metaphysical issues stem from the physics reality, the physics science is also influenced by the metaphysical speculation. Physics science that appears to be *rigid*, with the system and laws, can have the vision widened through metaphysics.

Thus, realizing their existence that encompasses the physical and the metaphysical worlds, humans also realize that life is also influenced by the existence of creatures other than humans. The existence of these other creatures is also believed to give positive and negative effects to the human survival. Negative effects normally come in the form of disturbance or disease, whether physical or mental. Thus, humans perform rituals to cure diseases and prevent negative consequences from the supernatural beings. By performing the rituals, humans believe that a positive aura can be made present to ensure the survivability of existence.

According to Taib (1985), human belief towards the supernatural is directly associated with religious belief because believing in God is the mainstay in religious beliefs. Meanwhile, according to Yasin (1984), religion is the belief in the existence of the Supreme, Omniscient God and He is free to act, arrange and manage the universe, the belief that enables one to succumb to Him with hopes, worry, obedience and principles. In short, it means “the faith towards a spiritual being that deserves to be granted “loyalty and acts of worship” or “belief to the existence of the Higher Supreme” also the behavior of practice based on this said belief.

On this note, the belief towards religious understanding and the mystical phenomenon is a metaphysics aspect that can guide people to transcendent truth (Trusted, 1991). This is because, both these aspects have proven that it can motivate and inspire those who work their way to understand and explain about the physical world. Following this belief, there is the possibility of the *ngalai/berasik* ritual performance to have been created. The practitioners of this ritual performance believe that this physical world is also influenced by the metaphysics world, or the supernatural, which by myth, is believed as the soul of their ancestor referring to the belief of animism.

Animism is a belief about the existence of supernatural beings that can influence life (Sinar, 1978). It is a form of religion that derives from the understanding or the belief of the primitive people who had the opinion that the universe, or every thing, alive or otherwise does have souls. The word animism comes from Latin which means the soul. The soul is believed to influence human life. For them, the soul is arranged from one source or fine matter which resembles gas or air. From the standpoint of the primitive, the soul has a form and it also has an age (Nasution, 1973). Thus, they believe that their place of residence is also inhabited by these supernatural entities. From the belief, the offering and ritual are done in *ngalai/berasik*. The aim is to respect and to ask for the permission from the creatures to give them blessings especially in healing diseases.

It is from there that the Bajau/Sama' community believes that the shaman who connects with the supernatural entity is a skilled individual and one who has supernatural power. It is an outstanding skill for the community because not everyone has supernatural talent and skills. According to Koentjaraningrat (1989), this power is owned by a group of people who are really into the supernatural powers to achieve a certain purpose. It also shares the same aspect, whereby there is a leader or a shaman leading the ceremony, there is equipment and certain places. They believe that this power is a secret except for certain things like *ngalai/berasik* ritualistic performance.

For Bajau/Sama', no one can really argue about the extent of a shaman's capability. He is able to know everything that happens and he will be condemned if it is harmed. Being a shaman, he also bears an important responsibility in the society. They are the point of reference about issues like diseases or things happening around them. According to Stutley (2003), Shamanism is the one of the earliest and farthest-reaching magical and religious traditions, vestiges of which still underline the major religious faith of the modern world. The function of the shaman is to show his or her people to unseen power behind the appearances of nature, as experienced through intuition, in trance states or during ecstatic mystical visions. Meanwhile, specifically in the traditional Malay context, and generally in the Archipelago, the role of the shaman is as a mediator between the physical world and the metaphysic world. This is because the shaman has its own skills, he has his company which is the supernatural being, or an entity from the metaphysic world. Thus, the shaman can communicate with it, in the attempt to heal the disease believed to have been caused by the entities themselves (Abdul Rahman, 2015).

Benefits to the Nation

This study outcome is relevant to the Malaysian government policy as an effort to re-elevate the traditional arts as a national heritage that needs to be conserved and learned by the contemporary generation so it will sustain. Arts and culture have a very important role in a

country. It is an element of the construction of the national identity, create national harmony, wellbeing and unity. Today, cultural arts is more and more important and prominent with the capability of contributing to the national income through the development of creative industry and tourism industry. Government's concern towards the conservation of the people's original heritage so that it will not disappear through the surge of development, is strengthened by the establishment of the National Heritage Foundation which idea comes from the Government's advisor in social and cultural affairs, Tan Sri Dr. Rais Yatim. The National Heritage Foundation is created as a non-governmental association that centers on heritage conservation and preservation. The main objective is to enhance and maintain the awareness about the conservation and development of the past heritage in Malaysia and the Malay world (Achipelago) among the people. The objective of the foundation is definitely to elevate the national heritage to the international status other than becoming an eye-opener that Malaysia has high value heritage (Samaile, 2016). Meanwhile, the Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in '11th Malaysia Plan Presentation Text; "Progress also means that the arts, culture and civilization are expanding. This is why, RMK-11 also stresses on artists and local arts activists to develop the national creative industry. Answering to the recommendation, something that needs to be analysed in driving back the grand traditional performing arts is by offering a justification about the importance of conserving and sustaining *ngalai/berasik* as a unique performing arts in the form of intangible heritage that increases the community's integrity other than spurring national development.

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Endnotes

ⁱ This study will be using both terms of Bajau and Sama' with the mark (Bajau/Sama') to refer to the same ethnic group.

ⁱⁱ *Tulah* is something that is believed to happen when an individual commits something bad, that violates the rules for insytance, going against the taboo, violating the vicinity of the supernatural beings, hurt other people, disobeying parents, or saying something bad about one that may not be true.

ⁱⁱⁱ Referring to this study, the term '*ngalai*' is used by the ethnic group of Bajau/Sama' Kota Belud whereas the ethnic group of Bajau/Sama' in Kota Marudu uses '*berasik*' to explain the same ritualistic performance. Thus, this study employs both terms using the mark (*ngalai/berasik*).

^{iv} *Embo'-embo'* - the term used by Bajau/Sama', is a supernatural creature that helps the shaman in the *ngalai/berasik* healing performance.