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## *Duang*: The Semiotic Interpretation and Perception of the Bajau-Sama Community in Sabah

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### ABSTRAK

*Rencana ini memperkenalkan interpretasi dan persepsi semiotik tradisi masyarakat Bajau-Sama di daerah Kota Belud, Sabah, berkaitan adat kematian. Perbincangan akan difokuskan kepada komunikasi tanpa lisan dalam ritual kematian yang dikenali sebagai ngeduang. Ngeduang disimbolkan sebagai perbuatan 'memberi makan dan membantu' si mati semasa mengharungi 'dunia baru'. Ia merujuk kepada 'pemberian' yang diberi keluarga si mati kepada orang miskin dan individu yang menghadiri kenduri. Pemberian itu dipanggil sebagai duang. Lazimnya, duang mengandungi makanan tradisi seperti kalas, kuih sinsim, kuih jala, kuih penjaram, kuih berate, saging randang, kuih wajid, inti', nasi dan lauk pauk yang mempunyai maknanya tersendiri. Selain itu, hubungan antara makna tersurat dan tersirat tentang duang dengan interpretasi dan persepsi masyarakat Bajau terhadap kehidupan mereka turut dibincangkan*

*Kata kunci: Adat kematian, Duang, komunikasi tanpa-kata, semiotik, Bajau-Sama*

### ABSTRACT

*This article is to introduce the semiotic interpretation and perception of the Bajau-Sama tradition, specifically on matters pertaining to the traditional funeral customs of the Bajau community in Kota Belud, Sabah. It focuses on the non-verbal communication aspect in the death rituals called the ngeduang ceremony. Ngeduang symbolizes the act of feeding the dead and helping him or her proceed to the new life in the nether world. Ngeduang refers to alms given by the family of the dead to the poor people and the people who attend the feast. The alms is called duang which normally consists of traditional food such as kalas, kuih sinsim, kuih jala', kuih penjaram, kuih berate, saging randang, kuih wajid, inti' and also rice and dishes where each will represent something. Besides, the relationship between the explicit and implicit meanings of the duang with the Bajau's interpretation and perception towards their lives will also be elucidated.*

*Key words: Demise Customs, Duang, non-verbal communication, semiotic, Bajau-Sama*



## INTRODUCTION

Sabah is famous for its beautiful and breathtaking fauna and flora as well as its multi-ethnic groups along the coastal areas and the highlands. Each of them differ in traditional practices, lifestyles, economic activities, languages or dialects, norms, moral values, beliefs and religion. The cultural identity of each ethnic group is at times depicted symbolically through non-verbal communications.

Although the Bajaus are the second largest aboriginal group in Sabah, in-depth study of their culture are rare. The Land Bajaus along the West coast of Sabah have nevertheless been studied by researchers such as Hassan (1980), Zulkifly and Sulong (1983), Hanafiah (1991), Asmah (1990), Jasni (1993) and Saidatul Normis (1999). Detailed studies of the Sea Bajaus have at the same time been conducted by Yap Beng Liang (1993) and Clifford Sather (1997). Research about the Land Bajaus in Kota Belud and their means of communication are extremely limited. This article aims to introduce the culture of the Bajaus at Kota Belud on the West coast of Sabah to the outside world through the non-verbal aspects of communication in the Bajau tradition, particularly on matters relating to the funeral customs or the *ngeduang* ceremony.

### THE SUBJECT AND THE LOCATION: BAJAU AND KOTA BELUD

The Bajaus are the second largest native group after the Kadazandusuns. They are also known as the *Sama*. They settled in various districts in Sabah such as Tuaran, Kota Kinabalu, Papar and Kudat. Although most of them are found in two main districts, namely Kota Belud and Semporna, this community can be divided into two essential groups. They are the West Coast Bajaus and the East Coast Bajaus. Many studies accept the official view that the East Coast Bajaus are the Sea Bajaus or *Bajau Laut*. The Sea Bajaus are those who settled in Semporna, Lahad Datu, Pulau Omdal, Pulau Danawan and Pulau Bum Bum (Yap Beng Liang 1993; Sather 1997; Rosnah 2001). Those who settled in Kota Kinabalu, Tuaran, Kudat, Papar and Kota Belud are the West Coast Bajaus, also known as the Land Bajaus or *Bajau Darat* (Yap Beng Liang 1993; Asmah 1990).

Differences in physical appearance, language use, lifestyle and customs have warranted their separation into two groups. However, the Bajau elders appear unaware of new sub-groups of Bajaus. This sub-group call themselves *Jomo Sama* (for the West Coast Bajau) or *A'a Sama* (for the East Coast Bajau), which means the *Sama* people. The word "Bajau" is derived from the Bruneian-Malay language, and has been accepted in Sabah in reference to those who speak the *Sama* language (June 2005).



These classifications resulted from studies done by scholars who perceived significant difference for the division. However, judging from their settlement history and the origins of the Bajau community, one could just as well conclude that they come from the *Sama* ethnic group, originally known as the Sea Nomads, boat dwellers or skilled sailors. Once the Bajau migrants had settled in Sabah, they involved themselves in economic endeavours ranging from fishing to planting to breeding farm animals. They also adapted to local customs and the demands of the physical terrain. As time passed, the different economic pursuits on land and in the sea gave rise to terms like *Bajau Darat* and *Bajau Laut*. The majority of Bajaus are Muslims, but there are a few like the *Palau*' who still practice pagan beliefs.

This study was conducted in Kota Belud, where the Bajaus have a distinct culture and a sizeable population. The town is situated on the West coast of Sabah, about 70 kilometers or about an hour's journey by car from Kota Kinabalu, the Sabah state capital. The name Kota Belud originates from the *Sama/Bajau* language which means "the fort on the hill". The district has also earned itself the nickname of "East Cowboy District", in honour of the residents' skill in horse riding and because of the number of cows and buffalos reared there.

A survey from 2000 (Department of Statistics Malaysia) showed the population of Kota Belud to be around 71,615. Majority of them are Bajaus and Kadazandusuns. Apart from that, Kota Belud's inhabitants include Iranun, Suluk, Chinese and other ethnic groups from the Philippines and Indonesia. As with other districts in Sabah, Kota Belud is governed by a district officer with the aid of two assistant district officers and a few local representatives. The people of Kota Belud earn their living by farming, fishing, doing small businesses and are employed as government servants.

## SEMIOTIC AND COMMUNICATION

Viewed broadly, communication is said to have taken place when a message is conveyed through a media between two parties. This means that communication is not just about explicit symbols, but also involves embedded elements such as behaviour, signs and symbols that carry meaning. We may, therefore, say that communication can be either verbal or non-verbal. Verbal communication refers to communication through speech and writing, for example what is commonly known as language (Barker 1984).

Seiler and Beall define non-verbal communication as "...all behaviors, attributes, or objects (except words) that communicate messages which have social meaning" (2005:110). This can be divided into several categories, including facial expression, signs, kinesics, oculusics, physical attributes, haptics, olfactics, proxemics and territoriality, chronemics, paralanguage/vocalics,



silence, physical and psychological environment, and also artefacts (Seiler & Beall 2005).

The non-verbal communication in the demise customs or death rituals of the Bajaus have been analysed through a semiotic theory. Linguistics and cultural semiotics is a branch of communication theory that studies the signs and symbols that humans use to convey feelings, thoughts, ideas and ideologies (including how they talk, write, sing, smell, gesture, image, music and arts). It analyses how symbol systems are constructed and understood. Semiotics focus on the analysis of cultural and psychological patterns in language, art and other cultural expressions used for representing and interpreting phenomena as demonstrated by famous semioticians such as Ferdinand de Saussure, 1857–1913 (the father of modern linguistics), Charles Sanders Peirce, 1839–1914 (the founder of the pragmatism doctrine) and Roland Barthes (1915–1980). Semiotics and communications have a lot in common because they share concepts such as coding, symbol, meaning, decoding, perception and interpretation. Although the emphasis may differ, a semiotic study may be applied to a broad range of other disciplines, including linguistics, art, literature, anthropology and sociology.

#### SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION AND PERCEPTION OF THE *DUANG* AND *NGEDUANG* TRADITION

The demise customs or the death rituals of the Bajau community in Kota Belud are somewhat similar to those practised by the Malay community at large. The ritual starts with the bathing of the dead body, followed by a prayer, the wrapping of the dead body in a shroud and lastly, the burial. Generally, a feast for the dead or the *kenduri arwah* will be held for seven days and seven nights. Besides that, grand feasts to remember the dead are held on the seventh, fortieth, and hundredth day after the death and upon completion of a year, the dead then officially “leaves” the world. The *ngeduang* ceremony is performed during these feasts.

*Ngeduang* symbolizes the act of feeding the dead and helping him or her proceed to the next life in the nether world. It also means the giving of alms by the family of the dead to the poor people and the people who attend the feast. The alms refer to the food called *duang* that is given away by the family as a charitable act. *Ngeduang* also includes the preparing of *duang*. Normally, *duang* contains several types of traditional food which are obligatory such as *kuih sinsim*, *kuih jala'*, *kuih penyaram*, *kuih berate*, *kalas*, *saging randang* (banana fritters fried without flour), *kuih wajid*, *inti'* (a sweet dish made from coconut and sugar cane) and also rice and dishes. Each of these dishes have a symbolic value to the ritual.



One of the famous foods in *duang* is *kuih sinsim*. The *kuih sinsim* looks like a steering wheel of a vehicle. It is circular in shape, palm-sized, white in colour, sugary in taste and solid in structure. Made from flour and sugar, the colour and the solid form represent the human bones and are a reminder that humans have to work hard to fulfil their basic needs by using their four main bones. This *kuih* is thus solidly made to imitate human strength and power in confronting the hardships of life.

Another prominent food in *duang* is *kuih jala*. It is sweet in taste, semicircular in shape, golden in colour and somewhat brittle. It is made from rice flour and sugar and represents human hair. The tousled structure of the *kuih jala* is also reminiscent of hair which is layered and dishevelled. Elderly Bajau women value their long hair partly because of the belief that the volume would function as head support when one dies. This explains why elderly Bajau women like to grow their hair long. Besides, the half moon and the buffalo horn shape of the *kuih jala* also represents the farm culture of the Bajaus. They also symbolize strong ties within the Bajau community.

*Kuih penyaram* is another obligatory food in *duang*. It is also known as *kuih telinga keling* in the Peninsular Malaysia. This *kuih* can be found in three dominant colors: white (made from white sugar), chocolate/brown (made from sugar cane) and green (made from *daun pandan/pandan*). According to the Bajaus, *penyaram* depicts the human heart through its soft and spongy texture. The heart is precious because it reflects personality and records good and bad deeds. The Bajaus tend to be very concerned about benevolence as a prerequisite for tranquil relations between humans. Besides, *penyaram* also symbolizes the sun and represents the sincerity of those participating in the *ngeduang* ceremony.

*Duang* also includes *kuih berate*, which is made from rice that has been cooked, dried and then fried. Its uneven and rough texture represents the condition of the stomach. It is also a warning to the Bajaus to take good care of their health and be careful about what they eat. Besides *kuih berate*, there is *kalas* which is made from glutinous rice wrapped in a *kalas* leaf. *Kalas* has a triangular shape and a salty taste. Normally it is served with fried fish. In old days, relatives who had to travel far to attend a *ngeduang* ceremony would take the energizing and tasty food along to sustain themselves on the journey. *Kalas* also reminds the Bajau that they are paddy planters who have rice as their staple food. *Inti*' is another important sweet food in *duang*. It is made from old coconut cooked with sugar cane or *gula hangus* and is rather moist to the touch. *Inti*' serves symbolically to sweeten the disposition of attendees to speak only good of the dead. These ensures that their good deeds live on concretely through those the deceased have touched with his or her good deeds.

Besides those main foods stated above, *duang* also consists of *kuih wajid*, *saging randang*, rice and dishes such as fried fish, boiled eggs and vegetables (long beans *masak tumis* is the popular one). In the past, *duang* foods were



available only during the *ngeduang* ceremony; but nowadays these can be bought at small markets, bazaar and *tamu* in Kota Belud. These days, *kuih sinsim*, *penyaram*, *kuih wajib* and *kuih jala* are also served during ceremonies, gatherings and festivals such as marriages, big feasts, *raya* celebration. Only *kuih penyaram*, *kuih wajib*, *kuih sinsim* and *kuih jala* can be kept for months without going bad while the rest do not last longer than a week or two.

Usually during the *ngeduang* ceremony, the family of the dead or the host will provide plenty of *duang* known as *duang ruma*'. The host will normally prepare a minimum of 60 to 200 items for the feast. *Duang ruma*' can be further categorized into the main *duang* called the *kepala duang/ tikok duang* and the normal *duang*. There are three main *duang*(s) meant to be given away to the three most important attendees. The first main *duang* divided into three packs is given away to the *imam* or the leader of the ceremony. Each packet consists of seven to ten traditional foods. For example, each of the three packs will have seven to ten *kuih penyaram*. Other foods in *duang* is also packed into groups of three; for example three packs of rice, three packs of fried fish, three packs of vegetables, three cans or bottles of beverages, three cakes. The second main *duang* goes to the major *yassin* reciter whereas the third main *duang* will be presented to the main *tahlil* reciter. They each get two packs of food. The normal *duang* is given away to relatives and guests.

Interestingly, the *ngeduang* ceremony goes beyond the mere giving away of *duang*. There is the *nambi' duang* or the act of exchanging *duang* items between those relatives and guests who bring along their own *duang* to the feast. This *duang*, known as *duang tampu*, is meant to be offered to departed relatives. It is believed that it will reach the nether world as food for these dead relatives. It is an expression of generosity of the people involved. The contents of the *duang* indirectly reflects the personality and creativity of the people involved. During the event, the host appoints a representative to handle the exchange of *duangs*. Normally, the *duang* owner will make a wish and inform the representative about the person for whom the *duang* is meant. Sometimes the *duang* owner does not decide on a specific recipient, in which case, the decision is left to the host's representative.

There is a *ngeduang* ceremony that is not held as a demise ritual, but during the Muslim *raya* celebration. This is the *duang raya*'. The *duang raya*' was a way in which the first day of the Muslim *raya* celebrations were celebrated before the widely practiced concept of open house of today. Traditionally, the Bajaus would bring their own *duang* and gather at a mosque or *surau* where they would exchange their *duang*(s) with another person. Another variant of the *duang raya*' is the *duang subu*. The purpose was the same, except that the owner of *duang subu* did not meet the recipient at the mosque. Instead, he or she would take the *duang* at dawn to the house of the person with whom he or she had promised to exchange the *duang*(s). This tradition is now rarely practised.



## THE SEMIOTIC MODIFICATION

Interestingly, the content and presentation of *duang* has changed over time along with the changes in the financial status and the lifestyle of the people. Traditionally, *duang* only consisted of a few traditional foods mentioned earlier. Nowadays, extra food such as cakes, bottled or canned beverages, canned food, snacks, biscuits, sweets and plenty of meat dishes (fish, chicken, meat and vegetables) cooked in various styles such as *masak rendang*, *masak kicap*, *masak lemak*, *masak asam manis* have been added to the feast.

The way *duang* is presented has also changed. Traditionally, *duang* is wrapped in a *begiang* leaf. Later, the Bajaus became more creative and placed *duang* in a basket called *tembusa*, made from coconut leaf. After some time, boxes and plastic bags came into use to accommodate the extra weight and contents of the *duang*. Nowadays, *duang* is placed in practical and user friendly plastic baskets, basins, designer paper bags or other things that can later be used in daily life.

Changes made to *duang*, whether in content or representation, reflect the changing interpretation and perception of the *duang* owner, the *duang* recipient and all others involved. Nevertheless, it continues to be seen as a charitable act of alms giving. In addition, it also inculcates the spirit of neighbourly collaboration and strengthens ties (*ukhuwah*) among relatives. On the negative side, *duang* is used as a show of personal success, generating spendthrift habits and jealousy.

## CONCLUSION

*Duang* is a unique practice of the Bajaus in Kota Belud which distinguish their culture from those of other ethnic groups in Sabah including the Sea Bajaus that inhabit the East Coast of Sabah. There are three main categories of *duang*, namely *duang ruma*, *duang tampu* and *duang subu* or *duang raya*. The underlying meaning of the *duang* and *ngeduang* is what makes it both appealing and exclusive. They capture the worldview of the Bajaus in a potent manner, and despite many modifications, the basic idea remains the same. The chances are good that this tradition will continue to have a special place in the heart, life and culture of the Bajaus in Kota Belud. The task of the Bajaus now is to make certain that the younger generation understands the central role this tradition plays in the community's self-identification.

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