

## **DUANG: THE SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION AND PERCEPTION OF THE BAJAU-SAMA COMMUNITY IN SABAH**

Halina Sendera Mohd. Yakin  
&  
Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali  
Universiti Malaysia Sabah

### **Abstract**

Sabah is not only famous for its beautiful and breathtaking fauna and flora, it is also known for its multiethnicity which has more than 40 different ethnic groups including the sub-ethnic groups. The second largest ethnic group in Sabah is the Bajau. This article will portray and explicate the non-verbal aspects of communication in the Bajau tradition, mainly on matters relating to the demise customs or the *ngeduang* ceremony. This study is conducted in Kota Belud where a sizeable Bajau community with their own culture and the size inhabited in that area. The demise customs or the death rituals are slightly similar to the demise customs of the Malay community. The content and presentation of *duang* has changed over time depending on the financial status, trend and life style of the people. The changes of the *duang*, either for the contents as well as the presentation have different covert meaning, depending on the *wish* of the *duang* owner and the interpretation and perception of *duang* recipient and guests.

### ***Duang*: Interpretasi Semiotik dan Persepsi Komuniti Bajau-Sama di Sabah**

### **Abstrak**

Sabah bukan saja terkenal dengan fauna dan flora yang cantik, ia terkenal kerana kepelbagaian etnik yang menjangkau 40 kumpulan etnik dan kumpulan subetnik. Kumpulan etnik kedua terbesar ialah Bajau. Artikel ini memerihalkan dan menjelaskan aspek bukan lisan dalam komunikasi budaya Bajau, khususnya merujuk adat kematian atau adat *ngeduang*. Kajian ini tertumpu di Kota Belud yang mempunyai komuniti Bajau yang besar dan mendiami di kawasan itu. Adat kematian orang Bajau mirip adat kematian orang Melayu. Kandungan dan persembahan *duang* telah berubah dan bergantung kepada status kewangan, trend dan gaya hidup masyarakat. Perubahan *duang*, sama ada dari segi kandungan dan persembahan memberi makna tersurat yang berbeza. Ini bergantung kepada keinginan pemilik *duang* dan tafsiran dan persepsi penerima dan tetamu *duang*.

**Keywords:** non-verbal, custom, communication, multiethnic, indigenous culture

## Introduction

Sabah is not only famous for its beautiful and breathtaking fauna and flora, it is also known for its multi ethnicity which has more than 40 different ethnic groups including the sub-ethnic groups. This variety exists due to the variation of cultural aspects of each ethnic group. Each of this ethnic group represents their own identity which is portrayed in their behavior, lifestyle, economic activities and location, language and dialect, norms and moral values, beliefs and religion, as well as custom practiced in daily life. Uniquely, the cultural identification of the community can also be depicted symbolically through non-verbal communication.

Bajau community is the second largest aboriginal ethnic in Sabah. Nevertheless, it is sad to mention that the in-depth study of the Bajau culture is very limited and not prolific, particularly the Bajau of Kota Belud. Among the studies on Land Bajau which settle in the west coast of Sabah have been conducted by researchers such as Headlley (1951), Hassan (1980), Zulkifly and Sulong (1983), Hanafiah (1991), Asmah (1990), Jasni (1993) and Saidatul Nornis (1999). On the other hand, the studies on Sea Bajau have been conducted in details by Yap Beng Liang (1993) and Sather (1997). The specific study of the Land Bajau in Kota Belud particularly a study on the cultural tradition and its relationship with communication is very rare.

Therefore, this article will portray and explicate the non-verbal aspects of communication in the Bajau tradition, mainly on matters relating to the demise customs or the *ngeduang* ceremony, so that the cultural identity and the ethnic identification of the Bajau Kota Belud in west coast Sabah will be known to others.

## The Subject and the Location: Bajau and Kota Belud

Bajau community, which is the second largest aboriginal ethnic after Kadazandusun, is also known as the *Sama* community. They settle in many districts in Sabah such as Tuaran, Kota Kinabalu, Papar and Kudat. However, most of them settle in two main districts that are Kota Belud and Semporna. This community can be categorized into two essential groups; West Coast Bajau and East Coast Bajau. The state of Sabah and many other studies identify the East Coast Bajau community who are settling in Semporna, Lahad Datu, Pulau Omadal, Pulau Danawan and Pulau Bum Bum as the Sea Bajau or *Bajau Laut* (Yap Beng Liang 1993; Sather 1997; Rosnah 2001). On the other hand, The West Coast Bajau community who are settling in Kota Kinabalu, Tuaran, Kudat, Papar and Kota Belud are called the Land Bajau or *Bajau Darat* (Yap Beng Liang 1993; Asmah 1980;1990).

The classification of these terminologies is resulted from studies done by researchers and is used by our government in order for the other community as well as the people of Sabah to identify easily the ethnic groups. Due to certain differences between the *Bajau Darat* and *Bajau Laut*, for example, their physical look and personality, language use, lifestyle and customs, the identification of each ethnic group is essential. Nevertheless, the terms *Bajau Darat* and *Bajau Laut* are only superficial or the surface characteristics of this community. This is because most of the Bajau community especially the elders are not aware of these

terms. They only call themselves as *Jomo Sama* (for the West Coast Bajau) or *A'a Sama* (for the East Coast Bajau) which mean *orang Sama* (*The Sama people*). The word Bajau is derived from the Melayu-Brunei language which has been accepted in Sabah as a term used to refer to those who speak *Sama* language (Jun 2005).

The researcher believes that the existence of these classifications is the result of the studies done by scholars who find that there is a difference in the cultural identification of each ethnic group. Based on my understanding, if we look at the history of their settlement and the origin of the Bajau community, we can conclude that they come from *Sama* ethnic group, who is originally known as the sea nomads, boat dwellers or skilled sailors. Different phase of settlement of the earlier Bajau settlers in Sabah has made them settle on land and this has influenced their job pattern or sea activities such as fishing to planting and breeding farm animals. As the time passes by, they have changed few of their original cultural identity and have formed their own culture in order to adapt to the local people and the new settlement. Hence, this scenario may initiate the existence of the term *Bajau Darat* and *Bajau Laut* so that there is a guideline to differentiate these two communities which at the end have formed their own culture. The majority of Bajau community are Muslims, and only few of the sub-ethnic groups of Bajau especially *Palau* practice pagan beliefs.

This study is conducted in Kota Belud. The justification of choosing the district matches the context of the study because the Bajau community there has their own culture and the size of the total population of the community inhabited in that area. Kota Belud is situated at the West Coast of Sabah, 70km from the Kota Kinabalu, the capital state for Sabah. It takes about an hour journey by car to this district. The name Kota Belud originated from the ethnic *Sama/Bajau* language which means the 'fort' for the word 'Kota', and the 'hills' for the word 'Belud'. Therefore, Kota Belud can be regarded as 'the fort on the hills'. The district is also called as the 'East Cowboy District' for its residents who are skillful in riding horses, cows and buffalos.

Based on the population statistic of the year 2000 (Department of Statistics Malaysia), it is estimated that the total population of Kota Belud is 71,615. The majority of its people are dominated by the Bajau community and Kadazandusun. This is because these ethnic groups are seen as the aborigines as well as the earliest settlers of this district. Apart from that, Kota Belud is also populated by Illanun, Suluk, Chinese ethnic groups and also the location of migration for various other ethnic and sub-ethnic groups from Philippines and Indonesia. Similar to other districts in Sabah, Kota Belud is governed by a district officer who is accompanied by two assistant district officers and few local representatives. The people of Kota Belud earn their living through agriculture, fishery, farms, businesses and government services.

### **Semiotic and Communication**

In a broader concept, communication is said to be taken place when a meaning or message is conveyed through various ways and forms. This means that communication is not just about explicit symbols but also embedded aspects, such as behavior, signs or symbols that carry meanings and these meanings have to be thoroughly interpreted. Thus, communication is categorized into two which are verbal communication and non-verbal communication. Verbal

communication refers to symbols which have universal meanings to the people involved in the communication and it exists in the form of speech and writing that are known as language (Baker, 1984).

Non-verbal communication, on the other hand, has a deep meaning attached to it. Seiler and Beall define verbal communication as "...all behaviors, attributes, or objects (except words) that communicate messages that have social meaning" (2005:110). This means that non-verbal communication involves any forms of behaviors, objects, attributes, messages or symbols, apart from words or the use of language, be it speech and writing. Non-verbal communication can be divided into few categories; communication involving facial expression, signs, kinesics, oculosics, physical attributes, haptics, olfactics, proxemics and territoriality, chronemics, paralanguage/vocalics, silence, physical and psychological environment, and also artifacts (Seiler & Beall, 2005).

To analyse the non-verbal communication in the demise customs/death rituals of the Bajau, Semiotic theory is applied. Linguistics and cultural semiotics is a branch of communication theory, which is the study of signs and symbols (including human beings talk, write, sing, smell, gesture, image, music, arts etc) that humans use to convey feelings, thoughts, ideas and ideologies. It includes the study of how meaning which arises from the sign and symbol system is constructed and understood during the perception and interpretation of sensory data. Semiotic analysis focuses on the cultural and psychological patterns that underlie language, art and other cultural expressions that is used as a tool for representing and interpreting phenomena. Among famous semioticians are 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. There is an overlap between semiotics and communication, because both disciplines share many similar concepts such as code, symbol, meaning, process of decoding, perception and interpretation, although the emphasis is different. Other than communication, semiotic study is also used in a broad range of disciplines, including linguistic, art, literature, anthropology, sociology etc.

### **The Semiotic Interpretation and Perception in the *Duang* and *Ngeduang* Tradition**

For the Bajau community in Kota Belud, the demise customs or the death rituals are slightly similar to the demise customs of the Malay community; the ritual starts by firstly bathing the dead body, performing a prayer for the dead body, wrapping the dead body in a shroud and lastly, burying the dead body. Generally, a feast for the dead or the *kenduri arwah* will be held for seven days and seven nights. Besides that, a grand feast to remember the dead will also be held on the seventh, fortieth, hundredth day of the death and upon completing one year from the date the dead 'leaves' the world. Interestingly, the *ngeduang* ceremony will be performed during these grand feasts.

Implicitly, *ngeduang* symbolizes the act of feeding the dead and helping him or her to go on with the new life in the new world. *Ngeduang* also means the deed 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* which will be given away (disedekahkan) by the family of the dead to those people who attend the feast. Thus, *ngeduang* means to prepare the *duang*. Normally, *duang* contains few traditional foods (which appear to be obligatory) such as *kuih sinsim*, *kuih jala*,

*kuih penyaram, kuih berate, kalas, saging randang* (banana fritters which are fried flourless), *kuih wajid, inti'* (sweet dish which is made of coconut and sugar cane) and also rice and dishes where each will represent something. The semiotic interpretation of these traditional foods will be explicated according to the Bajaus' interpretation and perception of their cultural identity.

One of the famous foods in *duang* is *Kuih Sinsim*. The shape of *kuih sinsim* looks like a car steering and wheel except for the color and size. It has circular shape, palm size, white color, sugary taste and solid structure. This *kuih* is made from flour and sugar. The white color and the solid form signifies human bone structure which means that humans have to work hard to fulfill their basic needs by using their *tulang empat kerat*. Therefore this *kuih* is made solid to symbolize the human power and strength in facing the hardships of life.

Another prominent food in *duang* is *Kuih Jala*. It has sweet taste semicircle shape, golden color and a little bit brittle. *Kuih jala* is made from rice flour and sugar. Implicitly, *kuih jala* represent human hair. The covert meaning behind the tousled structure of *kuih Jala* visualizes the hair condition, lots of layers and disheveled if uncombed. The Bajau old generation regards long hair for women as a main concern due to the belief that long hair will perform as head support if one's dead. This belief makes the Bajau, particularly the old women attempt to grow their hair to make it long. Besides, the half moon and the buffalo horn shape of *kuih jala* can also represent the traditional task of the Bajau as a farmer. It can also be considered as a symbol of strong ties among the Bajaus.

*Kuih Penyaram* is another obligatory food in *duang*. It is also known as *kuih telinga keling* in west 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* leaf) and has two distinguished shape, round and *samarinda*. It has sweet taste because it is made from rice flour and sugar. In Bajaus' perception, *penyaram* stand for human heart based on its soft and spongy texture. Heart is one of the most precious parts in human body system because it can reflect one's personality and his/her good or bad deeds. Bajau people are very concerned about having good hearted or a benevolent attitude because it can bring tranquility in human relationship. Besides, *penyaram* also symbolizes a sun that surrounds Bajaus' world and thus it represents the sincerity of those people who participate in the *ngeduang* ceremony.

Other than those foods mentioned before, *duang* also consist of *kuih berate*. It is made from rice which firstly will be cooked, then dried out and lastly will be fried to make it fragile. The uneven and rough texture of *kuih berate* represents the condition in human stomach. Implicitly, *kuih berate* can be considered as a sign of warning to the Bajau people to take great care of what they eat and their health because all consumed foods and beverages will be digested in stomach.

In addition, *duang* also consist of *Kalas* which is made from glutinous rice, and wrapped with *kalas* leaf. *Kalas* has triangle shape and salty taste. Normally it is served with fried fish. In old days, relatives who live far away have to go through a long journey to attend the *ngeduang* ceremony. Thus they will take along *kalas* to feed their starving stomach because

*kalas* has a fulfilling and satisfying taste. With *kalas* on their side, they will stay out of hunger and tiredness before arriving at the feast venue. *Kalas* also visualizes the traditional task of Bajau as a paddy planters and rice as a staple food for this community.

*Inti'* is another important sweetened food in *duang*. It is made from old coconut which is cooked with sugar cane or *gula hangus* and has moist taste. *Inti'* served as sweets to those people who attend the *ngeduang* ceremony so that they will only talk and story about all the good things of the dead. Symbolically, *inti'* means helping the dead to possess all the good deeds, from the behavior of all those people who are still alive.

Besides all those main foods stated above, *duang* also consist of *Kuih wajid*, *Saging Randang*, rice and dishes such as fried fish, boiled egg and vegetables (long beans *masak tumis* is the popular one). In the past, normally foods in *duang* can only be found during the *ngeduang* ceremony but nowadays, almost all of the foods can be bought at many small markets, bazaar and *tamu* at Kota Belud. In addition, *kalas*, *kuih sinsim*, *penyaram*, *kuih wajid* and *kuih jala* are also served during ceremony, gathering and festival like marriage, feast, Hari Raya etc. Among the obligatory foods in *duang*, only *kuih sinsim* and *kuih jala* can last for months whereas the rest can not be retained more than a week except for *kuih penyaram* and *kuih wajid* where both can last for about two weeks.

Importantly, during the *ngeduang* ceremony, the family of the dead or the host will provide plenty of *duang* known as *duang ruma'*. Normally the host has to prepare a minimum of 60 and maximum of 200 *duang ruma'* in every *ngeduang* ceremony. *Duang ruma'* can be further categorized into two, *kepala duang/tikok duang* (the main *duang*) and normal *duang*. There are three main *duang* provided which will be given away to top three people according to their ranking/importance in the *ngeduang* ceremony. The first main *duang* will be given away to the *imam* or the leader of the ceremony and each of the *duang* content must have three packs or items. Each pack normally has seven to ten traditional foods, for example three packs of *kuih penyaram* and in each pack, there are seven to ten *kuih penyaram* and so forth. Simply, in main *duang* there are about 21 – 30 traditional foods in which each are packed in three packs. Other extra foods in *duang* also has to be in three numbers, for example three packs of rice, three packs of fried fish, three pack of vegetables, three can or bottle of beverages, three pack of cakes etc. The second main *duang* goes to the head of the *yassin* reciter whereas the third main *duang* will be presented to the head of the *tahlil* reciter. The content of *duang* in the second and the third main *duang* consists of two packs. The normal *duang* will be given away to the relatives and guests.

Uniquely, the activity during the *ngeduang* ceremony is not only limited to giving away the *duang* to those people who attend the feast by the family of the dead. Besides, the ceremony consists of activity *nambi' duang* or activity of exchanging of *duangs* between those relatives and guests who bring their own *duang* to the feast. The act of bringing his own *duang* to the feast means that the *duang* owner wants to join the *ngeduang* ceremony on behalf of his/her family who has already passed away. This *duang* is known as *duang tampu*. They believe that the *duang* can reach the dead to feed and help him or her to go on with the new life in the new world. Besides, this activity also indicates the generosity of those people involved. Indirectly, it also reveals one's personality and creativity by looking at the content of the

*duang* and the way it is presented. During the event, the host will appoint one person (as the host's representative) to handle the activity of exchange of *duangs*. Normally, the *duang* owner will make a wish and inform the representative, about the person who she or he wishes to receive the *duang*. Sometimes it happens when the *duang* owner does not decide the *duang* recipient and in this case, the representative will act as a decision maker to decide whose *duang* goes to whom and vice versa.

In addition, besides fulfilling the ritual in the demise custom, there is another *ngeduang* ceremony which is held during the *Hari Raya* festival only which is called *duang raya*'. The purpose for preparing *duang raya*' is to celebrate the big day because in the past there is no concept of having open house during *Hari Raya* like most people do nowadays. Traditionally, the Bajau will bring their own *duang* and gather at a mosque or *surau* where they will change their *duang* with another person. Another name for *duang raya*' is *duang subu*. The purpose is the same as *duang raya*' but it is called *duang subu* because the *duang* owner do not have to go to the mosque to find the *duang* recipient. Instead, he or she will take the *duang* at dawn to the house of the individual whom he or she has promised to give the *duang* and vice versa. However, nowadays not many people still exercise the tradition.

### **The Semiotic Modification in *Duang* and *Ngeduang* Ceremony**

Interestingly, the content and presentation of *duang* has changed over time depending on the financial status, trend and life style of the people. Traditionally, *duang* only consists of few traditional foods (as mentioned before). However, nowadays the tradition has changed enormously in which extra foods are also included such as cakes, bottle or can beverages, can foods, snacks, biscuits, sweets and plenty of dishes (fish, chicken, meat and vegetables) which are cooked with varieties of cooking style such as *masak rendang*, *masak kicap*, *masak lemak*, *masak asam manis* etc.

Besides, not only extra foods and beverages are included, but the way *duang* is presented has also changed. Traditionally, *duang* is wrapped with *begiang* leaf. Later on, when the Bajaus are more creative, *duang* is placed in a basket called *tembusa*' which is made from coconut leaf and *designed* to form a basket shape. After some time, box and plastic bag are used to accommodate the extra weight and contents of *duang*. Nowadays, to be more practical and friendly user, *duang* is placed in a plastic basket, basin, designed paper bag or other things (home appliance) that can be utilized in daily life.

The changes of the *duang*, either for the contents as well as the presentation have different covert meaning, depending on the *wish* of the *duang* owner and the interpretation and perception of *duang* recipient and guests. Therefore, *duang* can bring both positive and negative impact. The positive side of *duang* is that it is considered as a deed of alms giving. In addition, the gathering also inculcates the spirit of neighborhood, collaboration as well as strengthens the ties (*ukhuwah*) among relatives. Nevertheless, *duang* also has negative impact especially if someone wants to show off by adding extra ordinary contents of *duang* and presenting it in the most expensive way. Thus, it can create spendthrift habit and boastful manner as well as the feeling of jealousy.

### **Conclusion**

*Duang* is one of the unique traditions of the Bajau in Kota Belud which distinguishes their cultural tradition from other ethnic groups in Sabah even from the Sea Bajau that inhabited 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 or implicit meaning behind the *duang* and *ngeduang* is one aspect that makes it appealing and exclusive. Those embedded and covert meaning represents the world view of the Bajau and their cultural identity. The tradition is still being practiced until today but nowadays the concept of *ngeduang* and *duang* has been modified, mostly because the Bajau want to adapt and to accommodate with the current situation and lifestyle of the people. However, the basic intention of *ngeduang* and traditional foods in *duang* are still unchangeable to maintain the cultural tradition. *Ngeduang* has both positive and negative impacts that depending much on the intention, perception and interpretation of the *duang* owner, *duang provider* and *duang* recipient. The researcher believes that *duang* and *ngeduang* will always have a big special place in the heart, life and culture among the Bajau in Kota Belud. Thus, it is a task for the Bajau to promote and inform others especially the younger generation about *duang* and *ngeduang* tradition so that it will not be forgotten.

#### **About the authors**

*Halina Sendera Mohd. Yakin and Dr. Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali are lecturer and senior lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah respectively.*

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