



## BERASIK RITUAL PERFORMANCE OF THE BAJAU/SAMA': AN EMBODIMENT OF SPIRITUAL CHARACTERS



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### ABSTRACT

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This paper elaborates on the ritualistic performing arts of *berasik* practiced by the Bajau/Sama' ethnic group in the state of Sabah. The study was done using a qualitative approach through the ethnographic strategy application concentrating on the relationship between the function of *berasik* which traditionally performed for healing purposes and the animistic religious beliefs which is derived from believe in the existence of spirits (metaphysical entity). The community of *berasik* practitioners believe that the physical world is influenced by the metaphysical world, especially where it concerned the existence of other worldly beings, the myths and spirits associated with their ancestors. They also believe that the places they inhabit are also shared with the presence of these other worldly, spiritual beings. Based on these beliefs, offerings are prepared and rituals are done in the *berasik* performance with the main aim of respecting and asking permission from these spiritual beings to help with the healing process. Individual who is able to see spirits is said to be capable and have the privilege of curing a disease caused by *tulah* (plague) due to the interference of spirits. The artistic works produced signify their spirit towards the artists' cosmology of religious beliefs. *Berasik* is a combination of the elements of dance, singing, music and acting. Performer in *berasik* is expected to receive the spiritual characters in order to be able to serve as its embodiment. The embodiment of sacred being or character in *berasik* is possible by employing certain costume and props. By these devices, the personality of the performer is dispelled and performers are able to embody the sacred being in order to help in healing processes.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the embodiment of sacred being or character in the ritualistic performing arts practiced by the Bajau/Sama' ethnic group in the state of Sabah, Malaysia. The research results of the study could contribute to future studies on ritualistic performing arts.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The ethnic diversity in Malaysia makes this country rich with various traditions and cultures. This factor creates various forms of arts and performance according to various forms of arts and performances according to their respective belief and practice. The belief and practice of the society in Malaysia began since the era of

animism<sup>1</sup> until the emergence of religions and beliefs that has shaped the society. Assimilation comes from ethnic richness laden with various beliefs and their customs, and Malaysia is full of various cultural heritage. This heritage serves as the symbol and integrity of an ethnic group that has become the mainstay of the development of national identity.

The Bajau<sup>2</sup> people are generally the second largest group in the state of Sabah, Malaysia. Before the reign of British in the 19-th century, the people of Bajau/Sama' were nominally placed under the ruling of Brunei and Sulu. The Bajau/Sama' people were characteristically maritime where their skills and knowledge on the sea were never doubted. They were seafarers and lived nomadically, and their source of sustenance depended on sea life. Nevertheless, the Bajau/Sama' started to move to the land when there were economic activities and they pursued the yields of the forests to survive. The choice of this location as the residential area of Bajau/Sama' community is because the location would be suitable for agricultural-based economic activity.

## 2. BAJAU COSMOLOGY AND THE EXISTENCE OF *BERASIK* RITUAL PERFORMANCE

The supernatural belief has become an important phase of life among traditional or primitive society. This kind of thinking system is well-known among people in Borneo, particularly among an ethnic inhabiting a state of Sabah, Malaysia, namely the Bajau/Sama'. Fundamental belief that beside the body, a human is also consisting of spirit, and the notion that death will result in the transition from a human nature of a material form to a spiritual being that is immaterial based, clearly shows the community cosmology and world-view about the existence of supernatural beings and spiritual world (Mohd, 2013). In relation to that, Bajau/Sama' cosmology as coined by Mahali (2012) is divided into four levels. The lowest level is called the *bumi* (earth) where it is a home to the Bajau/Sama' community and at this level, the Bajau/Sama' community have to live in harmony with each other. The second upper level is known as sky (*langit*). The sky level is inhabited by the *mangat/semangat* or spirit (ghost). This level is also known as a level of punishment for who during their life time were no of a good character. Therefore, when the wicked dies, his/her spirit will be at the level of the sky and will not be moved to another level because they have received a reply from the crimes made during their lifetime.

The third upper level is called the spirit (*roh*) level where it is believed to be a home of two spirits, namely *embo'-embo'* (ancestors) and *meron* (evil creatures). It is believed that *the embo'-embo'* is the spirit of Bajau/Sama' generation that has long die and became a good spirits that constantly monitor the movements of their descendants whereas *meron* is an evil spirit who always tries to disturb Bajau/Sama' community. Meanwhile, the highest level is a *Látallah*, where the highest God is living (Mahali, 2012).

The *berasik* performance is derived from the ritual that relates with the procedure in the religious ritual practiced by the Malay community since the era of animism. It is a set of patterns from symbolic actions like certain forms from worship, sacrifice and prohibitions. Rituals are the result of human desire in their pursuit of connection with the supernatural, as humans themselves would naturally possessed some religious emotions. In the traditional context, performing arts was also a prevailing form of ritual used in the healing process. Ritual performance is a process that is created from the action or desire to connect with the metaphysical world as they tend to have some religious sentiments. It is also a medium for uniting the intention of the members of the society with a belief through various procedures and actions done symbolically like certain forms that originate from worship, sacrifice

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<sup>1</sup>Animism is the basic religious belief that first emerged among primitive humans. Animism is the belief on the fact that every single thing on this earth has its own spirit, including the sun and the moon. They also believe that there are souls and supernatural entities living with them. Animism believes that every single thing on this earth has a soul that needs to be respected so that the spirit does not disturb humans, but will help in their everyday lives.

<sup>2</sup> There are various types of Bajau in Sabah, namely Bajau Samah, Bajau Marudu, Bajau Ubian, Bajau Tuaran, Bajau Suluk as well as Bajau Laut. The differences are apparent through the district, their origin and customs. However, the people of Bajau remain in the same society and family. This study uses both terms of Bajau dan Sama' with the sign (Bajau/Sama') to refer to the same ethnic group.

and prohibition. Thus, ritual performance is a ceremony that comes from the action and desire to connect with the supernatural for certain purposes which are normally seeking to obtain good, wellbeing and peace within the practitioners (Abdul, 2009).

The ritual procedure is also attached to the aspect of the existence and cosmos of the lives of mankind. This refers to the cosmology field which dwells into the universe. The scope of discussion covers the phenomena in the space and time encompassing the real world and the surreal world, also the position of human in that particular space. The relationship between man and the universe will ignite the creativity and the extraordinary capacity to produce artwork. It is also related to four cosmic elements, namely earth, water, fire and air. The work of art produced signifies their spirit towards the belief of religious cosmology of the artists. According to the theory of cosmology, the work of art is also believed to possess spirit or soul (Abdul, 2009). Cosmologically, all creatures that exist in this world are formed from four elements, namely fire, water, air and earth. Fire is hot and dry, air is hot and humid, water is cold and damp and the earth is cold and dry. From there, the body and soul form a complete entity, which is the existence.

Therefore, realising that their existence encompasses the physical and metaphysical cosmic spaces, humans are also aware that life can also be determined by the existence of creatures other than humans. The existence of these creatures is also believed to give both positive and negative effects towards the survival of the human existence. The negative effect would normally affect humans in the form of disturbance, or diseases, either physically or mentally. From there, humans perform ritual to heal their ailing, also prevent the negative effects that stem from the disturbance of the creatures. By performing rituals, humans believe that the positive aura can be made present to ensure that the existence can continue to survive. Consequently, beliefs in religion and mystical phenomena are metaphysical trajectories which can direct us towards transcendental truths (Abdul, 2015).

In relation to this, the belief towards religious faith and the mystical phenomenon is a metaphysical aspect that can drive us towards the truth that is transcendent. This is because both these aspects have proven that they can motivate and inspire people who make the effort to understand and explain about the physical world. Following the belief on the religion and mystical phenomena, this has made possible the existence of the *berasik* ritual performance. The society who practices *berasik* believes that this physical world is also influenced by the metaphysical world, which is the supernatural creatures, which, by myth, are believed as the spirit of their ancestors. They believe that the residents are inhabited by the supernatural creatures. Originating from this belief, the offering and the ritual are presented in *berasik*. The aim is to respect and to ask for the permission from the supernatural power to bless their actions, especially when it comes to healing various diseases.

### 3. TULAH

The people of Bajau/Sama' also believe in the concept of *tulah* (condemnation), which is the belief that the catastrophe can occur among the people who violate the orders and commands of the King or Sultan and the supernatural. Stemming from animism, Bajau/Sama' believes that this world is not only inhabited by humans and animals, but also by the supernatural creatures that influence the lives of the humans. They believe that there are good creatures that have extraordinary powers in helping to solve the problems of humans and there are evil creatures who give pain and adversaries in humans' lives (*tulah*). These creatures cannot be seen but their presence can be felt. Individuals who can see through these creatures are thought of as gifted and special, able to heal diseases caused by *tulah*. Individuals with this specialty will be regarded highly because they can help solve their problems – these people are called shaman or the witch doctors. Nonetheless, it cannot be spread to the public because it is feared that they will be disrupted by evil creatures. *Tulah* will happen when one commits evil deeds, or those who have violated the rules, for instance:

- i. Disobeying parents and not showing any respect to other people
- ii. Disturbing the areas of the supernatural.

- iii. Disobeying the taboo of the custom.
- iv. Hurt other people.
- v. Talk badly about something without any valid proof.

In this vein, automatically the concept of *tulah* forms the societal organizational structure that always remembers and which does not commit anything bad. If one is plagued with *tulah*, he should see someone who is in good contact with the supernatural to heal his diseases, and this person is the shaman. All the rules and regulations, also taboo commanded by the shaman must be followed to avoid the *tulah* from being ongoing. The taboo that is always recommended by the shaman is the taboo concerning food and drinks in certain areas thought of the residential areas of the supernatural.

#### 4. *BERASIK* RITUAL TO HEAL *TULAH*

From the belief on *tulah* there emerges the ritual performance of *berasik* based on animism seeking to achieve healing. It is a set of patterns from symbolic actions like certain forms of worship, sacrifice, and prohibitions. Rituals are the result of human desire in their pursuit of connection with the supernatural, as humans themselves would naturally possess some religious emotions. In the traditional context, performing arts was also a prevailing form of ritual used in the healing process. Ritual performance is a process that is created from the action or desire to connect with the metaphysical world as they tend to have some religious sentiments. It is also a medium for uniting the intention of the members of the society with a belief through various procedures and actions done symbolically like certain forms that originate from worship, sacrifice, and prohibition. Thus, ritual performance is a ceremony that comes from the action and desire to connect with the supernatural for certain purposes which are normally seeking to obtain good, wellbeing and peace within the practitioners (Abdul, 2009).

#### 5. ELEMENTS IN *BERASIK* RITUAL PERFORMANCE

In terms of the performance aspect, *berasik* ritual consists of five main elements such as;

- i. *Bomoh* (shaman)
- ii. Patients
- iii. Offerings
- iv. Music
- v. Dance (*ngalai*)
- vi. Acting

In the context of the traditional Malay in specific, and the Archipelago in general, the role of the *bomoh* or shaman is as a mediator or connector between the physical world and the metaphysical world. This is because a shaman has his own strength, where he often has company, or is attached to the supernatural spirits that serve as an entity of the metaphysical world. Thus, a shaman can communicate with the entities from the metaphysical world in the effort to heal diseases believed to have been caused by the spirit (Duangwises and Skar, 2016). This shaman is really respected by the people of Bajau/Sama' following his skills in healing various diseases using magic. This is because, Bajau/Sama' believes that *embo'-embo'* (the supernatural creatures) who cures the patients indeed exists because during the process of healing, the shaman will communicate with *embo'-embo'*. *Embo'-embo'* determines the way that the patient is to be healed, and the things he must avoid throughout his healing period. The shaman in the ritual performance of *berasik* often comprises of aging women.

For the purpose of performing for healing purposes, *sajian* (offerings) which comprise of some foods must be served for the supernatural creature (*embo'-embo'*) called upon to cure the patient. As coined by Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, offerings (*sajian*) are vital in the healing ritual. The reason why *sajian* is prepared, is following the belief that there is a spirit (supernatural) that gives life to the ritualistic performance. Thus, when performing this ritualistic dance, the shaman has to ask for the permission first by calling upon the spirit or soul of the ancestors so

that the performance will be blessed for healing purposes (Duangwiset and Skar, 2016). The foods come in the form of glutinous rice, *kuih penjaram*, water and boiled eggs. Sometimes, female white chicken is also prepared as one of the foods served for the *embo'-embo'*. The rice, *kuih penjaram*, and boiled eggs are prepared as foods for *embo'-embo'*. The foods will be added per request from *embo'-embo'* represented by the shaman. Meanwhile, incense is used to fumigate the performance and the patient areas. Other offerings such as candle, perfume, *bertih* (roasted grain rice), *mayang pinang* (nut cluster), *kain kuning* (yellow cloth), *kain merah* (red cloth) and *kain hijau* (green cloth) are also used.

## 6. EMBODIMENT OF SPIRITUAL CHARACTERS IN THE STRUCTURE OF *BERASIK* RITUAL PERFORMANCE

### 6.1. Embodiment

Generally, embodiment means someone or something that represents a quality or an idea. Embodied or embodiment may refer to psychology and philosophy that carries two meanings. The first is 'Embodied Cognition' (which is also referred to as the embodied mind thesis), a position in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind emphasizing the role that the body plays in shaping the mind. Second is 'Embodied Imagination', a therapeutic and creative form of working with dreams and memories. Whereas, in physical theatre training, the process of embodiment emphasizes the specific part of psycho-physical actor training based on the embodied mind thesis that seeks to unite the imaginary separation of body and mind (Clark, 2008).

The role of an "actor" or performer in ritual performances often tries to "weep out" his or her personality. The performer is often expected not to act the role of the god, spirit or mythological character, but rather to receive it in order to be able to serve as its embodiment. In *berasik* performance, the embodiment of a sacred being or character (spiritual character) is also possible by employing fixed costuming, masks or complicated make-up systems. By these devices, the personality of the performer is dispelled and performers are able to embody the sacred being in a similar way, generation after generation. The performers involved in embodying spiritual characters in *berasik* ritual performance are the lead shaman (age women), the second shaman (a man) and the patient. The embodied spiritual characters are derived from the Bajau/Sama' cosmological belief that formed the structure of *berasik* performance.

### 6.2. The Structure

The *berasik* ritualistic performance often takes three days led by a shaman. Thus, the efforts done by the practitioners to heal diseases include performing the *berasik* ritual performance with the purposes as the following:

1. To foresee the disease that might be suffered by the patient (First day)
2. To find the root cause of the disease (Second day).
3. To identify the type of 'spirit' that disturbs the patient (Second Day).
4. To recommend medicines that can cure the disease (Third Day).

Before the performance starts, the shaman will lead the preparation of the offerings and other equipment for ritual with the help of shaman's assistant. Nut cluster (*mayang pinang*) are tied to a rope hanging in the middle of the performance space by a crew of the ritual. Offerings are prepared in a tray consisting of candles, eggs, a bottle of perfume, *mayang pinang* (nut cluster), slices of cake bread (*kuih penjaram*), a glass of water, white flowers, and a plate of roasted rice (*bertih beras*). At the same time, incense (*kemenyan*) is burned in a bowl and a piece of yellow cloth and red cloth are placed close to the offerings tray. Meanwhile, the musician also prepared the musical instruments that comprise of a *kulintangan* and a hammered tin. The patient was lying on the side of the musician and in a state of unconsciousness and the audience sat around the room.

### 6.2.1. *Buka Panggung*

When all is prepared, the *berasik* performance will begin with the ceremony of '*buka panggung*' led by the shaman (age women) and followed by the second shaman (male), and two assistants (male and female) known as *dayang-dayang* (maidens). The purpose is to steer clear from the disturbance of the evil. The ceremony begins by burning off the incense while fumigating it throughout the whole area and also around the patient and reciting some mantra. This is followed by the shaman who takes a plate of roasted grain rice (*bertih beras*) from the tray and brought it out of the house and stood at the door. While reciting the mantra, the shaman sprinkled the roasted rice (*bertih beras*) to the home page at the front door. After three times of casting, the shaman came back into the house and put the remaining *bertih beras* into a serving tray. Several pieces of fabric were also used in the ceremony comprising of yellow clothes which used by the shaman to cover her entire head while facing the offerings placed in a tray. The yellow clothes is used by the shaman to incite the *embo'-embo'* to exorcise her body.

### 6.2.2. Embodiment of '*Embo-embo's* Character

After the ceremony of *buka panggung*, shaman is sitting in front of the offerings with the entire head covers will recite the mantra in a form of singing accompanied by *kulintangan* music. The song is actually a mantra that calls upon *embo'-embo'* to come and bless the performance and fulfill the request made. After a while, the shaman gets up and starts to dance (*ngalai*) while her left hand clinging to the hanging nut clusters and her right hands is holding a fan. This is the sign that the shaman has already penetrated by *embo'-embo'* and being in the unconscious state. Initially, the singing and the *ngalai* follow a slow tempo. However, when it gets to the peak, it becomes increasingly fast and upbeat and stops immediately when the shaman returned to her sitting position in front of the offering.

### 6.2.3. Embodiment of *Meron's* Character

While the lead shaman sits next to the offerings, the second shaman takes his position by sitting in front of the offering, covers his entire head with the red clothes and starts reciting the mantra. Red clothe is used by the second shaman symbolizes *meron*, the evil creatures from the spirits level in the belief of Bajau/Sama' cosmology. Besides that, red also symbolizes fire, blood and victim. After a while, the shaman gets up and starts to dance (*ngalai*) while his both hands clinging to the hanging nut clusters as a sign that *meron* has already goes into his body and made him achieves the state of unconsciousness.

### 6.2.4. Embodiment of *Mangat's* (Ghost) Character

While the second shaman is still dancing (*mengalai*), the unconscious patient who was lying on the side of the musician is brought by the shaman assistant (*dayang-dayang*) to the centre of the space and joining the second shaman to dance (*mengalai*). The entire head of the patient is covered with yellow clothes symbolizing that his body is being possessed by the *mangat* (ghost) from the sky (*langit*) level. Cosmologically, Bajau/Sama' community believe that yellow color symbolizes *embo'-embo'* as well as the sky (*langit*).

The singing and the *ngalai* will stop when the first shaman (who possessed by the *embo'-embo'*) begin to interact with patient whose body is being taken over by *mangat* (ghost). At the same time, the shaman's assistant (*dayang-dayang*) will play their role in controlling the movements of the patient who are exorcised by the *mangat* as well as to communicate with the lead shaman who possessed by *embo'-embo'*. During the process of communication between the *embo-embo'* (shaman) and *mangat* (patient), the shaman's assistant (*dayang-dayang*) will wipe off the patient's face with a yellow cloth and dust off his body. In the communication, things that asked by the shaman's assistant (*dayang-dayang*) to the *embo'-embo'* and *mangat* for the first day is to foresee the disease that might be suffered by the patient and about the root cause of the disease he suffers. After all is asked, the lead shaman will recite again the mantra and prayers to extract *mangat* from the patient's body and send it back to the fairyland

### 6.2.5. *Tutup Panggung* (The Closing of the Hall)

After the ritual ends, the shaman possessed by *embo'-embo'* will perform the *tutup panggung* ceremony, by sitting in front of the offerings, reciting the mantra, cleaning the space and keeping all the offerings and rituals equipment. After everything is done, the patient was informed about the conditions that need to be done or made available for the implementation of the second night ritual by shaman. Among these conditions are, the patient should be washed before starting the ceremony. So, patients are asked to bring a *sarong* to be used for bathing. In addition, patients were also asked to provide yellow clothes and green clothes for the use of the patient during *mengalai*.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In terms of the performance, *berasik* is a combination of elements of dance movements (*ngalai*), singing, music and acting. Traditionally, the ritual of *berasik* is a performance practice to heal, based on the animistic religion that believes in the existence of the supernatural. Individuals who can see these creatures are said to be very able and they have the specialty in healing diseases caused by *tulah* following the disturbance of the supernatural. The embodiment of supernatural characters plays an important role in the *berasik* ritual performance as it is a communicative code practiced by players especially the shaman and also the public, to identify the ideas contained behind the materials used. Through the embodiment of supernatural characters, the practitioners of the *berasik* ritual performance are able to get to know their world and justify their social life and their physical and spiritual lives. They would know about the arrangement of events and existence. They would learn about the meaning of power, sustenance, time and space, good and bad deeds, heaven and hell also life and death. Thus, the embodiment of supernatural characters through the performer's body is a symbolic utterances, which are meaningful and very mystical.

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