

Cosmology and World-View among the Bajau: The Supernatural Beliefs and Cultural Evolution

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2013.v4n9p184

Abstract

The focal objective of this paper is to elucidate the cosmology and world-view among the Bajau society by focusing on certain symbols in death rituals namely the *bangkai-bangkaian*, *duang* and *ngeduang* as well as the *mayang pinang* and *kelambu jomo matai*. The existence of those symbols reveals that the Bajau believes in the supernatural beings and power. However, due to modernization, the phenomenon of cultural transformation has become massive and difficult to avoid, and has brought a new dimension in the way of thinking among the Bajau contemporary. Based on these symbols and rituals of death, the researcher sketches a model of Bajau cosmology. This qualitative study employs semiotic and nonverbal communication perspectives as well as the structural approach. The data has been obtained mostly by interviews and participant observation carried out at Kampung Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia. This study is expected to build a positive contribution in the effort to document and preserve traditional cultural heritage of the Bajau society.

Keywords: Bajau, Cosmology, World-view, Death Customs/Rituals, Supernatural Beliefs, Cultural Evolution

1. Introduction

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. 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. Such a scenario is not something strange or unusual, because when traced from the historical and background beliefs of society, before the advent of the world's great religions such as Islam and Christianity to Borneo, the life of traditional society is indeed coloured, characterized and back-grounded with the realm of animism. Universally, communities from all over the world build their own old belief systems, rooted in the primordial/primeval powers greater than they have. Before professing and embracing those religions, people have faith in something that is believed to possess supernatural powers, such as animals and other spiritual creatures, besides devoting themselves to the natural strength such as the sun, moon, wind, water, rocks, trees and so forth. The difference is that there are people who have experienced modernity earlier and have tendency to adapt with the world surroundings. Such phenomenon contributes in the formation of new thinking and cosmological ideas in the strive to create a more modern, progressive and competitive community.

For Borneo people, belief in supernatural beings and powers, that is mystical and spiritual based can be seen from the ritual activities that are often practiced. From most of the rituals, there are five significant aspects that are of widespread significance and receive broad attention as researched and stated by Winzeler (1993) regarding the belief symbols and rituals implementation namely; the fertility of rice, the beheading and the using of head, birds and the signs of omens, the healing and traditional medicine, as well as treatment of the dead. Such beliefs make the assistance from the middle persons or spirit mediums like the shaman, medicine man, *bobohizan* etc are deemed needed, and this scenario raises the status of those people among the society members. Among the Bajau community, this kind of people is referred to special humanbeings who have *gimbaran*.

This article is aimed to display the cosmology and world-view of the Bajau ethnic through some customary symbols and rituals performed, especially in the death custom. The data has been obtained by using interviews and

participant observation. In an effort to understand the Bajau's cosmology and world-view based on symbols in death rituals as well as the application of the structural approach, the researcher discovers that there are some significant values and concepts that characterized the world-view and life of the Bajau. It covers systems of belief and religion, social, economy, psychology and genealogical history or biology; among them are the values of love and respect, cooperation and mutual assistance, *ukhuwah* and *silaturrahim* (human relationship), social status and hierarchy, the concept of *sedekah* (alms) and so forth. However, one of the prominent and dominant elements that influences Bajau traditional thinking is the belief in the supernatural beings and supernatural world. This justification is based on the rituals and symbols that dominate the behavior of Bajau in death matters; the symbols of *duang* and *ngeduang*, *bangkai-bangkaian*, *mayang pinang* and *kelambu jomo matai*. The effort to clarify these issues is executed by tracking down the socio-cultural, socio-economic and psycho-cultural contexts of the Bajau that includes history and psychological aspects, as well as belief and economic systems.

2. The Bajau in General

As what had been said in most western writing or research on ethnic Bajau tribe, the Bajau or also known as the Sama, is grouped as boat nomads or sea nomads, which refer to people who have a close affiliation with the sea and boating life, and tend to live a nomadic way of livelihood. In addition to these terms, this community is also associated with several names, including sea gypsies, waju and variation of pronunciations and spellings of the term Bajau, as Badjaw, Bajo, Badjoo, Bajjau and others. In Sulu, the Bajau is also known as Sama, Samal, Palau, Kaliaggeh and Luwaan. But despite the diversity of the names, the term Sama-Bajau is often used to refer to these ethnic tribal groups.

Geographically, the Bajau occupies several regions in Southeast Asia and becomes the indigenous people in three countries; the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia. In the Philippines, they can be found in the South or in the Sulu Archipelago, while in Indonesia, they settle in the east, especially along the coast of Sulawesi. In Malaysia, the Bajau mostly reside in Sabah. In this state, there are two major settlements of the Bajau community, namely the district of Kota Belud located on the West Coast as well as the district of Semporna, located on the East Coast. Apart from Kota Belud, the Bajau in the West Coast can be found starting from the Kudat Peninsula, Tuaran, Kota Kinabalu, Sepanggar, Putatan to Papar. In the East Coast, beside the town and the mainland of Semporna, the Bajau people also live in the islands such as Omadal Island, Danawan Island, Siamil Island, Bum-Bum Island and others. In spite of this, the Bajau people are also spreading across several other regions in Southeast Asia and perceived as the huge scattered ethnic groups who dominate the islands of Southeast Asia from ethnolinguistic point of view (Sather, 1997).

Demographically, the study by Sather (1997) about 15 years ago, estimated that the population of Bajau in the Malay continent was between 750,000 to 900,000 people. Therefore, it is not too overrate to say that nowadays the number of Bajau people on this continent is reaching more than one million people.¹ According to Gusni (2005), the Bajau ethnic population in three countries, namely Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia alone is estimated to reach 860,000. In Malaysia itself, particularly in Sabah (including the Federal Territory of Labuan), the number of the Bajau is rated at 334,671 people² (Yearbook of Sabah Statistics, 2005:16). In total, the Bajau on the East Coast is ahead of number, estimated at 169, 349³ people compared to the West Coast, which is figured at 165, 322⁴ people (Yearbook of Sabah Statistics, 2005: 16-18).

Writing and study of the Bajau origin can be traced since the middle of 20th century, including researchers such as David Sopher (1965), Najeed M. Saleeby (in Yap Beng Liang 1993), Cyril Alliston (*ibid*), Helen Follet (*ibid*), Harry Arlo Nimmo (1969), James Warren (171; 1972) and Clifford Sather (1965; 1966; 1968; 1979). In the late 20th century to the present (21st century), amongst top researchers who actively write and publish articles or books on the West Coast Bajau community, whether from within or outside the country are Yap Beng Liang (1985; 1990; 1993; 1997), Gusni Saat (2003;

¹ This figure is based on 2000 statistics, according to ethnic group and Sabah local authority area, and Federal Territory of Labuan. The figure includes the population of Labuan which is amounted at 3675 people and also of Malaysian citizen.

² This figure includes the Bajau of Tawau residency (Tawau, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna), and also Sandakan residency (Sandakan, Kinabatangan, Beluran, dan Tongod.)

³ This figure covers the Bajau of the West Coast (Kota Kinabalu, Ranau, Kota Belud, Tuaran, Penampang dan Papar), Kudat (Kudat, Kota Marudu dan Pitas), remote areas (Beaufort, Kuala Penyu, Sipitang, Tenom, Nabawan, Keningau dan Tambunan), and Federal Territory of Labuan.

⁴ To acquire detailed about the legendary tales, please refer to the studies done by Yap Beng Liang (1993), Sather (1997), and the latest study by Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali (2006).

2004; 2005; 2008; 2010), Mark Miller (2007) and Saidatul Nornis Mahali (1999; 2006; 2010; 2012). Nevertheless, until now the research and writing about the West Coast Bajau, especially the chronology of this community may be somewhat less prolific.

As of today, issues concerning the origins of the Bajau have not yet found a definitive final say due to the imperfection of history resources recorded and the diversity of literature available regarding the matter. Based on studies that have been carried out previously, there are many classical theories associated with the origin of this society, among them are the state of Johor in the Malay Peninsula and the Riau-Lingga archipelago, and Zamboanga in Southern Philippines. Informations that support the argument that the Bajau community comes from Johor and the Malay Peninsula are derived from the legendary stories described by Cyril Alliston (in Yap Beng Liang 1993), Najeeb Saleeby (*ibid*), Hellen Follet (*ibid*), the Bajau people of Pulau Omdal, and the latest story of Bajau Kota Belud and the version of the Bajo story from Sulawesi Indonesia.⁵ The legend of the Bajau from Pulau Omdal stated that Bajau people were originally from Johor, then moved to Sulu and finally anchored in Sabah. Helen Follet's (*ibid*) statement also stated that the Bajau were boat dwellers of the Malay Peninsula. Cyril Alliston (*ibid*) excerpt also explained that the Bajau was from Johor, as well as Najeeb Saleeby (*ibid*), which also suggested that before occupying Sulu, the Bajau came from Johor (Yap Beng Liang, 1993). Writings and researches by Sopher (1965) as well as demographic evidence from Earl and Tom Harrison also strengthen the theory which claim that the Bajau are from Johor (Gusni, 2005).

Meanwhile, the other opinion which claim that the Bajau people are from the Southern Philippines may be referred to the linguistic evidence, based on the comparative study of languages by James Collins (in Gusni Saat 2005), which argues that there are similarities between the dialects of Bajau people in Sabah with the Bajau people in Indonesia and in the Southern Philippines. Apart from the oral traditions that mention about 'Samboanga' as the origin of the Bajau, from a geographical view as well, the Bajau is said to begin moving from the island of Sulu, leading to the island of Borneo and proceeding to the island of Celebes in southern Philippines (Gusni, 2005). According to Gusni again (2005), the arguments and theories which claim that the Bajau people are from Johor are much stronger compared to Zamboanga.

Study on Land Bajau community conducted by Miller (2007) found that West Coast Bajau language is more akin to the Indonesian Malay language compared to the Philippines and Borneo languages family. These findings reinforce the hypothesis that was once said by Blust in 2005 which stated that Bajau people (proto-sama) are more likely come from Indonesia, which is located in East Kalimantan (Miller, 2007). Anchored to the fact that language is the foundation of civilization development, and one of the important cultural aspects in tracing cultural comparison between tribes, the author feels that the latest linguistic findings can be addressed. Miller's findings also confirm that although there are similarities, the Bajau language of the West Coast and East Coast are different. The language of the East Coast Bajau is more similar to the Bajau language of the Philippines. However, detailed examination regarding the chronology and the origin of the West Coast Bajau people are still necessary to prove the validity. This matter can only be finalized then if more of the same findings are obtained.

3. Bajau community in the district of Kota Belud, Sabah in general

The Kota Belud district has been chosen as the research location because it suits the research context and issues which are attempted to be carried out in this research. This is because the Bajau community in this area is still characterized by a traditional cultural backdrop to the present, in addition to the population size of the Bajau community in the area that dominates the figure of Bajau people along the West Coast of Sabah. Kota Belud district is located in the North West Coast of Sabah, about 77km from the capital state of Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, which is about an hour away by car. The area is bordered by the district of Tuaran, Kota Marudu and Ranau. 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 Town', in honour of the residents' skill in horse riding and because of the number of cows and buffaloes reared there (Halina Sendera & Saidatul Nornis, 2008).

With an area of approximately 1.386 square kilometers, the Kota Belud district has a population of 75,568 inhabitants according to census 2000. From the total, the Bajau is estimated at 26,054, the second largest native group after the Kadazan Dusun with a figure of 32, 682 people (Yearbook of Sabah Statistics, 2005: 10-13). From the above source, it is clear that the majority of the population in Kota Belud is dominated by the Bajau and Kadazan ethnic group which are regarded as indigenous peoples and were among the earliest in the area. In addition, Kota Belud is also inhabited by the Iranun, Suluk, Ubian, Chinese and other ethnic groups (immigrants) from the Philippines and Indonesia.

⁵ Dun begiang is a species of taro leaf forest

4. Symbols of death

Among the symbols of death that manifested the belief of supernatural beings and power among the Bajau of Kota Belud, Sabah are as the following:

4.1 *Bangkai-Bangkaian*

Bangkaian-bangkaian is symbolized as *peturian* (a bed or lounge) equipped with the deceased's clothing and personal possessions when still alive. *Bangkaian-bangkaian* is prepared by the deceased's family for a feast of seven days from the day of departure of the deceased to the otherworld. This is because the Bajau people believes that spirits of the deceased would come to his house to visit and see his family. The purpose of certain objects such as mirror that is placed on the *bangkai-bangkaian* is believed to make *mangat* (ghost) afraid and run when see his ugly terrifying image. Normally, goods will be donated to the deceased's closest relatives. Symbolically, the preparation of *bangkai-bangkaian* is to signify a symbol of affection from the family members towards the deceased so that he did not feel marginalized even though he has left this physical world (Halina Sendera, 2012).

4.2 *Mayang Pinang and Kelambu Jomo Matai*

The use of flowers during a funeral ceremony can be seen not only during the Bajau death ritual because universally the world community are using the same object to color the atmosphere of death, funeral and for other purposes. For the Bajau community, they weave a flower called '*mayang pinang*' for decorating the *sangkab sangkab* and the graveyard. Besides being used for decorative purposes, the flower also represents a symbol of love for those who have died. This is because there are individuals who are willing to stay up late at night in order to prepare the *mayang pinang* so it could be supplied together with the deceased, the newly died person. *Mayang pinang* is regarded as a gift or souvenir, not only for the individual who just died, but also to be delivered to those who have died before that. Based on the informant description, in the realm of the dead, *mayang pinang* is regarded as a kind of competition or reward among the dead people in their world (Halina Sendera, 2012).

Besides the *mayang pinang*, a symbol of love is also demonstrated through the preparation of *kelambu jomo matai* (net of the dead). It is made of bamboo used as a base or frame, and a white square formed cloth, by connecting parts of the reed-mate. It will be driven over the graves in order to protect the corpse from climate change and supernatural beings like the demon (*ibid*).

4.3 *Duang and ngeduang*

In Bajau culture, food symbolism can be clearly observed in the preparation of *duang* during the *ngeduang* ritual, which is usually performed during the grand feast on the seventh, fortieth, and hundredth day after the death, and upon anniversary of the death for those who can afford it. *Duang* is regarded as a *sedekah* (charity or alms), which is prepared in a form of serving various foods to guests. Traditionally, *duang* is wrapped in a leaf called *dun begiang*⁶ and then *tembusa* (a basket made from coconut leaf) take over the role of the leaf. Until today, *tembusa* still plays a role in placing or preparing *duang* although there have been other materials that play a similar function.

Symbolically, *ngeduang* means to feed the dead and help him or her to proceed to the next life in the nether world. Besides, it also means the giving of alms by the family of the dead to those who attend the feast, including the poor people and guests. Normally, *duang* contains some obligatory traditional foods, such as *kuih sinsim*, *kuih jala*, *kuih penyaram*, *kuih berate*, *kalas*, *saging randang* (banana fritters fried without floor), *kuih wajid*, *inti* (a sweet filling made from coconut and sugar cane) and also rice and various side dishes (Halina Sendera & Saidatul Nornis, 2008; Halina Sendera, 2012)). *Duang* represents a symbol of love and respect to family members and relatives who have died. In this understanding, the concept of *duang* exists because of the belief that spirits of the deceased need alms or aid for their survival in the new world. The concept of assistance (helping or fulfilling the need of the deceased) is also visible in other Asian cultural archipelago such as the studies done by Dzulfawati (2006), Metcalf (1991), Metcalf and Huntington (1979).

⁶ Based on description by Mrs. Jubaidah Binti Mulud.

5. The Bajau Cosmology and world-view

Universally, the term cosmology is referred to the study of cosmos. Specifically, it is a study that involves complex issues regarding origin of the universe, i.e cosmogony (Juli 2001; Singaravelu 2001; Hood 2001) and all aspects that related to world order including the existence of supernatural world and beings as well as sociocultural aspects because humanbeings are also part of the cosmos. Linked to this term is world-view which is defined as a cognitive-based perception or idea about the existence of something, and also concept about attributes, individual self as well as his or her social surroundings (Geertz 2008: 135). Dillthey also defined world-view or *weltanschauung* as "complex of ideas and sentiments comprising i) beliefs and convictions about the nature of life and the world ii) emotions, habits and tendencies based on these iii) a system of purpose, preferences and principles governing action and giving life unity and meaning" (Symonds 1991:15). The rituals and traditional practices in death customs are often associated with cosmology and world-view because the belief and practices related to death can provide a window for viewing a society's social organization, cultural values and world-view (Gang Chen 2000).

Previous researches which reveal the cosmology of the Bornean and Asian people demonstrate that the universe is divided into sections, layers or levels. The Melanau (Dzulfawati, 2006), the Brunei Dusunic (Pudarno Binchin, 1988), and the mainland Chinese/ People Republic of China (Gang Chen, 2000) for example, divide the universe into three main compositions. From among the three communities, the Melanau and Chinese suggest that the death world is located at the very bottom, under the layer of human occupation of the land and the division also has several other compartments or layers. Meanwhile, the Dusunic of Brunei perceives that the world of the dead is located beside the real or physical world, but separated by a dividing line, termed as the *batang goyoh*. Indigenous communities, especially the Semai as studied by Juli Edo (1993) and Ramle Abdullah (1993), believe that the universe is composed of seven layers and the spirits of the dead is located at the seventh layer. Meanwhile, the Timugon society (Raymond, 1982) believes that the world consists of two main compositions and the portion classified as supernatural also have specific compartments.

From the previous discourse and thorough analysis, it can be concluded that in Bajau cosmology, the universe is also divided into both the natural (material and physical) and the supernatural (immaterial and spiritual) world. This supernatural world has a number of parts and layers based on the creature settlements that inhabit particular areas. Before discussing in greater detail and sketching the Bajau cosmology, it needs to be addressed that the writer's idea regarding the status and parts of the world position is anchored or based on two intertwined primary aspects; the first being the nature of dependency or requirement of reciprocity between the creatures that are believed to inhabit and share this universe. The second aspect involves the question regarding the hierarchy of power or influence, that is the matter of superiority.

In this regard, it should also be noted that the mentioned cosmology is based on contemporary Bajau community ritual behavior, which of course has changed throughout time as the interpretation by A.Wahab Ali (2001:308) that cosmology is a science that reveals clandestine relation of the universe unification about an existence according to human perspective at a period of time, at a faith or belief and also at a society at times. This must be explained as the culture is well known for its dynamic nature. Precisely, because of that, cosmology is not static, constantly exposed to transformation that occurs as the saying goes, 'once the flood comes, once the coastal changes'. Environmental changes, patterns of thought and knowledge level would result in the transformation of the cosmology and world-view. Similarly, the influence of religion could also expand the horizon of society's level of understanding and knowledge. However, it is interesting to look at that during an epoch that hit the threshold of post-modernism in the 21st century, the Bajau ritual behavior indicates that the basic structure has not changed much and still being preserved. Although Islam had been rooted in the life of Bajau Kota Belud since the 16th century (or at least before the colonization period at the end of 19th century) , the animism world and belief still encircle their lives at least until this research has been done.

Based on the study, it can be concluded that, when reflected in a circle, the Bajau cosmology seems to have four levels or major compositions. God as referred as *Latallah* resides at the very top (fourth floor) perceived as filled with supernatural joy and beauty over everything on earth, which is deemed to be a paradise. In this place, He occupied the highest hierarchy or level based on the belief that He is the most powerful supernatural being and creator of all creations on earth and this universe. *Latallah* does not depend on any other creatures, including humans to sustain or complete his existence, but can punish or bless humans and other creatures based on their behaviors. In this supernatural world, there also live angels and *malaikat*, but they occupy layers below the *Latallah*.

The second level is reserved for the *embo*, namely the spirits who have passed away long time ago and no longer depends on the conducts or actions of human life for their survival in the new world. This explains why the ritual of *ngeduang* and preparation of the *bangkai-bangkaian* are no longer implemented for those who have passed away long

ago, that is they have at least held the status as a great-great ancestors to someone who are still living. In fact, it is very rare to see a grand child makes ritual for his/her deceased grandfather or grandmother. Not only because they had long passed away, but people or family members who were still alive when they left this world may have died and become a spirit or soul, and eventually became the occupant of the same realm. Although the *embo'* do not depend on the behavior of the living, they are still respected, feared and remembered among those who are still alive because their title or status and aura still continue to dominate the life and are able to control the actions of living persons. This is because they are believed to always keep eyes on their children, grandchildren or great grandchildren and would advise them if they commit wrong words or wrong behaviours/conducts. The concepts of *keteguran* or *saksagan* are synonymous in the life of the Bajau, and those who *keteguran* will get sick. As such, the Bajau always ask permission or assistance from the *embo'* before doing something, like travelling, walking at night or rain and so on. The word that always goes in the beginning of a sentence when asking permission or demanding for an aid, is '*tabi'-tabi' mombo'* which means greetings to *mombo' / embo'*. The practise of *ngelog-ngelog* is also often being used to avoid the wrath or anger of the *embo'* by reciting a verse as follows:

"*Ngelog-ngelog kam embo', maku ampun maku maap jo bangan anak empu bi tu, luman kami tu, da kam nagur-nagur*"⁷

In English language it means,

"*Ngelog-ngelog o embo', please bear us (your children, grand children or great grandchildren) forgiveness, we are on our way, do not call upon us*"

Thirdly, it is a level in which the world is divided into the real world and the supernatural world. As previously mentioned, the real world is inhabited by humans and other concrete objects or events, while the spiritual world is inhabited by supernatural creatures. In the supernatural world, there are particular residencies, namely the zones of air, land and water. In the air zone, there are two spaces which house the soul and spirit. Souls of the dead are placed in a column, while another column, which is above the soul space is allocated for the spirit. The soul will moves to the area of the spirit when the death is reaching 100 days. The researcher perceives that both human beings and supernatural beings share this world, (but separated abstractly) and both occupy the same floor or level because there seem to exist a two-way dependency nature among the occupants.

Looking at the relationship between the living people and the dead (refers to the soul and spirit which has yet to reach a level of *embo'*), the nature of dependency is not only occur on one side. Through the concept of *duang, bangkai-bangkaian* and *mayang pinang*, it shows that the survival in the world of soul and spirit depends on the conduct of those living people in the real world. The soul and spirit of the dead need necessities like food, clothing, jewelry or adornment and other personal needs, and these requirements can be met or fulfilled if family members perform the rituals mentioned earlier. This is due to the belief that these requirements will reach the deceased with the implementation of certain rituals through the prominence of the *sedakah* (alms) concept.

An interesting question to ponder is whether the pattern of dependency is only in a one-way or one side. If behaviors and actions of the living give impact to the lives of the deceased, what about the vice versa, that is the influence of the dead to the living. Does the Bajau make certain rituals without expecting reward or relief from the deceased? According to Chinese belief as been researched by Gang Chen (2000), ancestral spirits have the power or able to bless and to determine the fate of their children and grandchildren who are still alive so that they receive prosperity. As well as able to provide prosperity, blessings and survival to the society, the soul is also feared and believed to have adverse effects to the living as noted in the research done by Metcalf (1991) towards the Berawan society in Sarawak. In this understanding, the acts of the Bajau also illustrate that the well-being of the living also depends on their treatment towards the deceased. The concept of *ketulahan* or *busung* and the traditional cure and medication that need certain rituals to be accomplished such as bathing on the grave indicates a belief that the dead could bring calamity, threat or hardship to those who are still living.

Similarly, the existence of supernatural creatures such as *meron, galap, kokok, mangat, balan-balan*, etc, are believed to be capable of threatening the peace, harmony and health of an individual as well as the society. These creatures are believed to be responsible for a variety of suffering and misfortune or bad luck that befall the human,

⁷ SBBU recruited farmers and forest workers from the land of China to develop the agricultural plantations activities in Sabah during the late 19th century. The Chinese immigrants is reported being increased from the years 1900-1941 (Siti Aidah 2007:76).

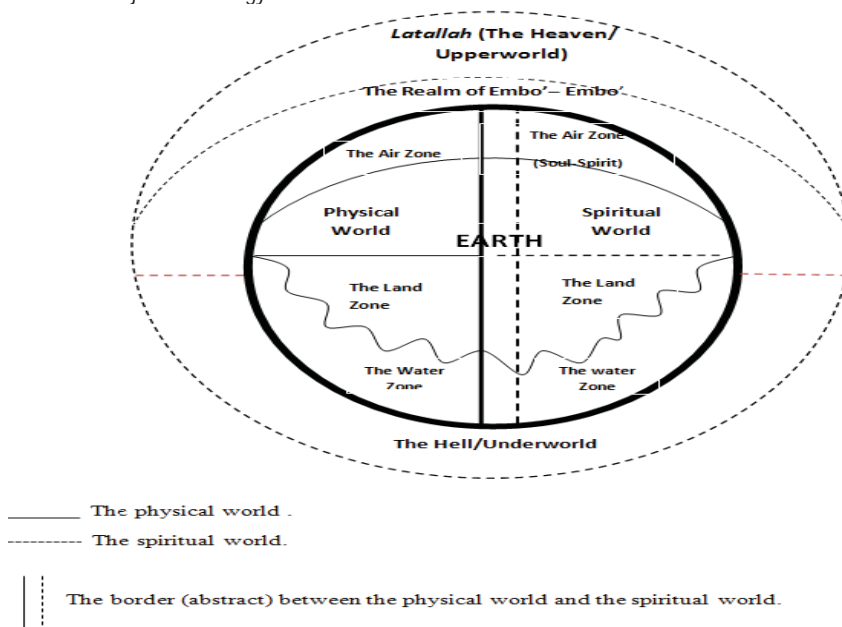
including accident, sickness and disease, even death. Calamities or mishaps can be evaded by performing the rites of propitiation, including offering gifts of food and other requirements or necessities for soothing or comforting the evil spirits. In addition, showing respect, obedience and avoid hurting their feelings can also be done, for example, before interrupting the places which is believed awaited by evil spirits (their settlement) such as cutting down trees, becoming close or touching a *punsu* (piles of soil which looks like a small tiny hill) and so on, one must ask for permission and apologize in advance to the supernatural beings who might be affected or disturbed by the actions.

Traditional treatments and ritual practices such as *ngalai*, *nelus*, *manut ajung*, and the act of *bejogo* (stay awake/alert) when the patient *ngeremun* (severely ill and on the verge of death) and during the period when *bangkai-bangkaian* is still in the house, *guris* and so on show that belief in the power of supernatural beings is very much influenced the mindset of the Bajau. Those beliefs led to the importance of role played by the ritual performers or spirit mediums that later on create the belief to the people with *gimbaran*, shaman, genie owner, the *ustaz* (religious teacher/person), etc; those peoples with special abilities and particular knowledge. In this sense, it appeared that the Bajau also recognize that the power of supernatural beings can be subjugated by the ritual or specific practices and also the practitioners. This description may not explain the nature of dependency of the supernatural beings (because to control these creatures, supernatural powers are also needed) that causes them to be classified in the same level or world. But from the hierarchy of power perspective, both sides are drawn.

The concept and meaning of death as well as life after death are associated with the Bajau belief about the existence of the heaven and hell, sin and reward or good and evil. The concept of heaven and hell gives great meaning and impact towards the community as it acts as a social and spiritual control system that capable of fencing and restricting the people behaviour in the real world. In this sense, heaven is provided for those who obey the Islamic teachings, which is doing good, while hell was made to respond to human beings who behave otherwise. Symbolically, heaven symbolizes beauty and goodness, on the other hand, hell signifies misery and evil. The concept of punishment in Bajau cosmology indicates that there exist the realm of heaven and hell. If heaven is perceived to be at the very top, it can be concluded that the hell is located at the very bottom, which is under the earth, by taking into account the belief that nothing on earth is more frightening or match the suffering of hell. In addition, the Bajau people believe that to get into heaven, one has to cross a bridge, in which under the bridge, there are a vast lake of fire described as hell. A person who is doing more good than evil will successfully cross the bridge, while those who do otherwise would fall into the underworld.

Adhere to the above discourse, the Bajau cosmology can be manifested as the figure below;

Model 1 : The Model of Bajau Cosmology



6. Discussion

The Semiotic of Bajau's cosmology and world-view show variation due to the collision with other external cosmologies. Like other traditional societies in Sabah, before the advent of Islam to the west coast of Sabah about five centuries ago, the world of animism which centered on the belief of supernatural power and beings also encircles the life and belief system of the Bajau community in Sabah generally, and in Kota Belud particularly. The intercultural relationship that has lasted for ages with people from other nations, especially the Malays of the Malay Peninsula and the Asians people resulted in Hinduism cosmological influence that gradually infused and penetrated the traditional culture, which ultimately impact the cultural behaviors of a society.

So far it has been known, there is no historical evidence that claims the Indians had migrated to Sabah before Malaysia gained independence. The Chinese society had indeed migrated to Sabah since at least during the reign of SBBU.⁸ In fact, there is a claim that the Chinese from the mainland (Republic of China) and Hong Kong has settled in Sabah as early as 1820s (Ismail Yusoff 1997). Hence, it is no doubt there are elements of diffusion, adaptation and cultural assimilation between people of different cultural background. From the historiographical diachronic analysis, the *weltanschauung* or the mindset structure of Sabah community, including the Bajau, has undergone an evolutionary process that influenced by the cosmology of three primary thinking systems that has evolved in different phases or stages (but not in an equal impact), namely the phase of paganism or animism, the phase of Hinduism and Buddhism and followed by the *Samawi* religions that came afterwards; the Christian and Islam. In this understanding, the animist and Islamic thought predominantly govern the thinking of Bajau community in Sabah.

The emergence of Islam in the west coast of Sabah approximately during the beginning of 16th century has brought major changes towards Bajau's life and to some extent has also undermined the belief of animism and Hinduism. The *Sufis* or the *ulama* (those with spiritual specialties) were believed to be responsible in spreading Islam to Sabah at the early stages. The spiritual elements including the supernatural components found in Islamic sources are perceived to be one of the reasons that facilitate people (who previously practiced animism) to accept and embrace the religion as a life guidance (Muhiddin Yusin, 1990; Ismail Yusoff; Ahmat Adam, 2012). In addition, Islam also recognizes the existence of *jinn* (genie) as contained in the verses of the Quran and this had also reinforced the traditional belief towards the existence of supernatural world and supernatural beings. However, the Bajau are indeed still lacking of the Islamic knowledge and have not fully grasped the teachings of Islam in depth since the pre-colonial era until the independence period (Muhiddin Yusin, 1990; Gusni Saat, 2008).

Related to the phase of belief system, from the socio-economic dimension as well, the Bajau's livelihood has experienced four phases of transition as described by Gusni Saat (2008; 2010) in his model of social transformation phase among the Bajau ethnic in Malaysia, namely the phases of DiLaut (the sea phase), Laut-Nelayan (the sea-fisherman phase), Tanah-Pertanian (the land-agricultural phase) dan Bandar (the urban phase). There is no doubt that the context of transition gives some impact on their cultural life. Starting with the phase of life at sea and sea-fishermen, the Bajau which is clustered among the group of sea gypsies or sea nomad have already believed in supernatural beings that lives in the ocean, including *kangkang laut* for the east coast Bajau and *galap* for the west coast Bajau which are not only believed to capable of providing *rezeki* (good fortune) but also can cause disaster if wrong steps and words are taken and uttered. During the sea phase, eventhough they have already embraced Islam, the Bajau are still not getting enough or learning deeply the Islamic knowledge because their way and patterns of settlement has become an obstacle and hindrance in implementing Islamic teachings (Gusni, 2005).

Understanding these limitations and because of some other overwhelming aspects, the Bajau switched to sedentary life and began to dismantle the economic system, which were previously confined to the marine resources to learning methods of cultivation. In the transition to the phase of Sea-Land Fishing and Land-Agricultural, the Bajau have adapted the life and culture of the Dusun community that had already built their lives at the mainland. The Dusun who is well-known for its legendary of *Hominodun* were indeed still have a strong belief in animism. In the adaptation process, it is possibly triggered a scenario in which the Bajau community began to build a belief in the paddy spirit known in this community as *tekok Parai* (the head of rice) which is perceived to be able to bless people's lives by ensuring that their survival would last longer through the provision of rice. The intercultural relations context with other communities and animism belief that has long lingered in their life might made it possible in reinforcing the belief towards the supernatural world and supernatural creatures. Viewed from the positive side, living in a phase of Agricultural Land actually facilitate the learning and execution of Islamic order and practice among the Bajau community. In addition, it also has raised their

⁸ Dahlberg. P. (1935). "Från partidemokrati till korporativ folkstat". Nationell Socialism nr 1-4, 7, 9. Se also: Unknown author. (1938). Den svenska nationalsocialismens program.

status among the multi-racial society in Sabah since the pre-colonial epoch (Gusni Saat, 2008).

Modernization boom that hit Sabah communities generally and Bajau community particularly, has created another new scenario in the community life. The transition into urban phase among the Bajau community at Kota Belud not only has changed their economic system, but their cultural conducts or behaviours have also experienced evolution. The Bajau community involvements in the political and administration system in government as well as private sectors have increased their horizon of knowledge and understanding of modern life. The emergence and association awareness among Muslims in Sabah have produced some well-known Muslim unions around the year 1960s until 1970s, including PIS, PIP, PIT and USIA with the ultimate goal to protect the interests of Islam and its followers in Sabah (Muhiddin Yusin, 1990; Siti Aidah, 2007) to some extent have helped the Muslim community in Sabah, including Bajau in Kota Belud to study Islam in depth. This Scenario has also influenced the Bajau behaviours in dealing with matters concerning the traditional customs and practices, including the customary rituals of death. No doubt, Islam has played an important role in the evolution, but it should be admitted that religion and modernity still can not threaten some of the Bajau's traditional belief including some traditional rituals in death custom that still continuously being practiced until today. This phenomenon shows that the thinking of the contemporary Bajau particularly in matters pertaining to supernatural beings and world still has not completely undermined and eroded. As a proof, the concept of *duang*, *bangkai-bangkaian*, *payung jomo matai* and *mayang pinang* has continued to prevail in their minds and those symbols of death have still been practiced and applied until this study has been conducted. However those rituals especially the *ngeduang* has been simplified to meet the current and modern environment and requirement.

Apart from historical aspect, the systems of belief, economic and politic, the concept of belief in supernatural beings and world can also be explained from the psychological aspect of the Bajau community. As of other communities, the Bajau also have humanitarian sentiments that create emotional limitations, fears and weaknesses. The fact is that people are addicted and needed of greater power than they have, not only to survive but also to meet any potential barriers and challenges in life. In addition, a human also has the attitude to blame on something by assuming that something is happening due to the supernatural power. Apart from that, the fear of evil spirits and ghosts has also coloured the Bajau emotional to date. In short, people need help from powers that beyond the normal human ability in order to achieve satisfaction and peace of mind or serenity. The aid is believed to be transmitted from supernatural beings such as *jinn* (genie), *meron*, *mombo'* and so on that mediated by the middle persons who are perceived to own certain specialties and as for the Bajau, they are among those who have *gimbaran* and *jinn*.

7. Conclusion

The effort to portray the cosmology and world-view of a society is not an easy task. The epistemology of Bajau cosmology, i.e the classification and categorization in the cosmos is explicated by two interrelated aspects, namely the aspect of dependency and superiority or power. In addition, the views derived from the Bajau death ritual that seems to be dominated by belief in supernatural beings are also discussed from various aspects. In a nutshell, the structure and symbols of death show that the influence of Islamic cosmology has coloured and transformed the Bajau cosmology and world-view which were previously dominated by animism and some of the Hinduism belief (especially the symbol of social hierarchy that is portrayed through the artefact of *payung jomo matai* (umbrella of the dead) and also the concept of reincarnation which are not discussed in this paper). Thus, in the 21st century, the cultural behaviours in death ritual and custom illustrate that the Bajau cosmology and world-view seems to have the element of syncretism; that is to say the adaptation and amalgamation between traditional and new beliefs. Yet, is not impossible to claim that changes will become more apparent in years to come because the Islamization is a continual process. The traditional practise and the ritual of the Bajau death custom live on as the meaning and function are still needed. The rituals of preparing *duang*, *bangkai-bangkaian*, *mayang pinang* etc among the Bajau society illustrate that death does not mean the end of a relationship between the dead people and his living kins or relatives. The bond is still prevailed and preserved eventhough someone has died. Through this kind of rituals the Bajau are able to signify, express and transmit their feelings, sentiments as well as human and societal values which are crucial in preserving and strengthening the social solidarity and equilibrium.

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