

## Social Hierarchy in Bajau Traditional Culture

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**Abstract** The primary purpose of this paper is to explicate the social hierarchy in Bajau traditional culture by focusing on matters pertaining to some symbols in death and marriage customs. According to the traditional hierarchy, the Bajau people are categorized according to four levels of social strata, namely the *Jomo Sepu (datu')*, *Jomo Wau'*, *Jomo Pitu'* and *Pinoto (Jomo Limo and Jomo Telu)*. In death custom, the concept of hierarchy is portrayed through the *payung jomo matai*, *balu-balu* and *duang*, whereas in marriage custom, it is manifested through *berian* or *mas kahwin*, *usungan* and *payung berjuntai*. This paper utilizes qualitative study that is based on ethnographic descriptions by employing participant observations and in depth interviews techniques, conducted at Kampung Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia. The primary data were analysed based on semiotic and non-verbal communication approaches.

**Keywords:** Social hierarchy, marriage symbol, death symbol, *Jomo Sepu*, *Jomo Wau'*, *Jomo Pitu'*, *Pinoto*

**Abstrak** Matlamat makalah ini adalah untuk menghuraikan hierarki sosial dalam budaya tradisional Bajau dengan memfokuskan kepada persoalan berhubung simbol-simbol dalam adat kematian dan perkahwinan. Berdasarkan hierarki tradisional berkenaan, orang Bajau dikategorikan kepada empat peringkat strata sosial, iaitu *Jomo Sepu (datu')*, *Jomo Wau'*, *Jomo Pitu'* dan *Pinoto (Jomo Limo dan Jomo Telu)*. Dalam adat kematian, konsep hierarki dipaparkan menerusi *payung jomo matai*, *balu-balu* dan *duang*, manakala dalam adat perkahwinan, ia dimanifestasikan melalui *berian* atau *mas kahwin*, *usungan* dan *payung berjuntai*. Metodologi kajian adalah berdasarkan kajian kualitatif yang bersifat deskripsi etnografi dengan menggunakan teknik pengamatan turut serta dan temu bual mendalam yang dilaksanakan di Kampung Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia. Data primer dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan semiotik dan komunikasi *non-verbal*.

**Kata Kunci:** Bajau Kota Belud, hierarki sosial, simbol perkahwinan, simbol kematian, *Jomo Sepu*, *Jomo Wau'*, *Jomo Pitu'*, *Pinoto*

## INTRODUCTION

Sosial hierarchy is a kind of social stratification that exists in a society when people is grouped or clustered according to differences in certain aspects such as income, privilege, power etc. The discussion about stratification system is often associated with the Indian community (but not only limited to this community) who are very popular with the caste system, a form of social class or strata differences based on ethnicity and wealth (which is endogamy<sup>1</sup> based), that is inherited throughout life from generation to generation. Theoretically, based on Indian caste system, one can only switch to a higher status through death and reincarnation.<sup>2</sup> Although the system was abolished in the 1980s, the cultural heritage continues to last for about three thousand years and still plays a significant role in the Indian life to date (Hunt & Colander, 2005). Social class differences also exist in the culture of indigenous ethnic groups in Borneo, particularly among the Bajau ethnic in Sabah, Malaysia with a slightly different ideology of the Indian caste system. Historically, before the advent of Islam, the intercultural contact with the outsiders, particularly with the Java community who have migrated to Borneo at one time,<sup>3</sup> and the Malays in the Malay Peninsula, contributed in the spreading of some of the Hinduism cosmological thinking system among the people of Sabah, including the Bajau ethnic. One of those is the thinking pertaining to the class differences.

Therefore, this paper attempts to explicate the social hierarchy among the Bajau of Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia specifically through symbols in death and marriage customs. The data were obtained mostly by interviews and participant observation conducted in and among the Bajau ethnic settled in the mentioned location.

## THE BAJAU IN GENERAL

As stated 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 refers to people who have a close affiliation with the sea and boating life, and tend to live a nomadic way of living. In addition to these terms, this group is also associated with several names, including sea gypsies, *waju* and variations of pronunciation and spelling 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 and the Semporna district, 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 is said to be a huge ethnic group scattered and 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 estimated at 334,671 people<sup>5</sup> (*Yearbook of Sabah Statistics*, 2005:16). In total, the Bajau on the East Coast is ahead of number, estimated at 169,349<sup>6</sup> people compared to the West Coast, which is estimated at 165,322<sup>7</sup> people (*Yearbook of Sabah Statistics*, 2005: 16-18).

Writing and study of the Bajau origin can be traced since the 20th century, including researchers such as Warren, Sopher, Saleeby, Alliston, Nimmo and Sather. In the late 20th century to the present (21<sup>st</sup> 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, Gusni, Miller and Saidatul Nornis. 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. Information that supports the argument that the Bajau community comes from Johor and the Malay Peninsula is derived from the legendary stories such as that described by Cyril Alliston, Najeeb Saleeby, Hellen Follet, the Bajau people of Pulau Omadal, and the latest story of Bajau Kota Belud and the version of the Bajo story from Sulawesi, Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> The legend of the Bajau from Pulau Omadal stated that Bajau people were originally from Johor, then moved to Sulu and finally anchored in Sabah. Helen Follet's statement also stated that the Bajau were boat dwellers of the Malay Peninsula. Cyril Alliston excerpt also explained that the Bajau were from Johor, as well as Najeeb Saleeby, which also suggested that before occupying Sulu, the Bajau came from Johor (Yap Beng Liang, 1993). Writings and research by Sopher as well as demographic evidence from Earl and Tom Harrison also strengthen the theory which claim that the Bajau are from Johor (Gusni, 2005; 2008).

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 Collins, 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 the 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 from Indonesia located in East Kalimantan (Miller, 2007). Anchored to the fact that language is the foundation of civilization building, 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 confirmed that although there is similarity, 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 of 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.

#### BAJAU COMMUNITY IN THE DISTRICT OF KOTA BELUD, SABAH IN GENERAL

The Kota Belud district was 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 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 groups which are regarded as indigenous people 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.

### **Social Hierarchy among the Bajau of Kota Belud**

In the Bajau social stratification and hierarchy that is heritage or traditional based, the Bajau people are categorized according to four levels of social strata, namely the *Jomo Sepu* (*datu*'),<sup>9</sup> *Jomo Wau*',<sup>10</sup> *Jomo Pitu*'<sup>11</sup> and *Pinoto* (*Jomo Limo* and *Jomo Telu*).<sup>12</sup> Based on the traditional heritage, the *datu*' represents the highest social status among the Bajau community, while the *pinoto* is the opposite. According to Saidatul Nornis (2003), there are only two ethnic groups in Sabah who use the title *datu*', the Iranun and Bajau community<sup>13</sup> and also claimed that the blood of the *datu*' are often said to be inherited from the Iranun ethnic compared to Bajau. The *datu*' in Bajau community is said to derive from the generation of mixed marriages between Bajau individuals who are not *datu*' with Iranun people who had descended *datu*.' However, according to Datu' Tigabelas Datu' Zainal Abidin, the origin of the *datu* descendant and title for the Bajau of Kota Belud is not originated from the Iranun. He claimed that his great grandfather by the name of Datu' Rombangang is a Bajau from Kota Belud that had already settled in the district before the colonization (British) period.<sup>14</sup> However, he did not deny that there are quite a number of Bajau people who got married with the Iranun of the *datu*' descendent in the olden days. The title *datu*' is passed down from generation to generation and can only be passed down to all the male who had descended the title (Yap Beng Liang, 1997; Saidatul Nornis, 2007). In this sense, a woman who descended the *datu*' typically will not give or bring the title to his children if she is to marry a man who is not of *datu*' descents. However, in matters relating to marriage customs, the *datu*' customs still applies to the woman's children.

In addition to the mixed marriages, the status recognition of the *Jomo sepu* or *datu'* is usually associated with politics, meaning those with power, especially in the areas of administration. According to Saidatul Nornis (2007), most of the Bajau community leaders stems from the *datu'* and give them many privileges and rights to act as decision-makers. It is clear that many Bajau political leaders are of the *datu'* descendents, including Datu' Salleh, Datu' Said Keruak, Datu' Arshad and Datu' Golkhan. In the past, (before colonial rule) the title *datu'* was allegedly derived from the sultanate of Brunei (Yap Beng Liang, 1997; 1993), which once ruled Sabah since the 16th century, for the contributions and services rendered to the throne. *Datu'* is considered as a local leader of the highest status among the Kota Belud Bajau community since at least the middle of the 19th century. Holding the highest status among the Bajau community, the *datu'* is given privileges and responsibility to help the sultanate of Brunei, especially in matters pertaining to tax collection and distribution of land at the village level. They can also be deemed as a mediator between the villagers and the government. In short, the *datu'* is usually among those who have important positions in rank or social organization, simply to say, those people with power. Related to the political aspect, the *datu'* is also synonymous with a stable economy, those possessing material wealth or property. In fact, this group is said to have slaves, especially among those who descended the *pinoto*.

The existence of social hierarchy in the Bajau culture cannot be ascertained with precision. However, it can be said to exist before the colonial period based on the diaries written by W. Pretyman (Harrison, 1956; 1957; 1958; 1959). In those diaries, there are many names beginning with *datu'*, including Datu' Bandarlat, Datu' Rombangang, Datu' Tumongong, Datu' Linte, Datu' Salimbeck, Datu' Ali and others.

The group that represents the second level of hierarchy is referred to as *jomo wau'*. The *jomo wau'* arises from the marriage of a woman who had descended the *datu'* with an ordinary people, i.e from the maternal side. Therefore, *jomo wau'* status is higher than *jomo pitu'* because this group has a family/blood relationship with the *datu'*. However, they are considered of lower status compared to the individual who gain his *datu'* from the father's side (paternal). Most people in the study area are among the people of *jomo pitu'*. However, according to an informant, Mr. Mohd. Yakin, his

father, a former Kota Belud *Ketua Anak Negeri* (KAN) (1976-1994), The late Abdul Mumin bin Sunsang, once said that there were people among the *jomo pitu'* who originally of higher status (*jomo sepu* or *jomo wau'*) but due to the unstable economic conditions, some of them did not inherit the title to their heirs. This scenario is also strengthened by a statement of an informant, Madam Jainisah Nurajin<sup>15</sup> who has a blood relationship with the *datu'* descent from his mother's side. She said that her grandfather (her mother's father) who of a *datu'* descendent has relinquished the title as a result of economic constraint.

Those who occupy the bottom level of the hierarchy are classically termed as the *pinoto*.<sup>16</sup> This group is perceived as the slaves, which are usually among the vassal to the *datu'* or Bajau leaders. However, the Village Head of Kota Belud, Mr. Saililah Bolong said that the ownership of slaves were not only limited to the *datu'*, but the people with the status of *jomo pitu'* can also have a slave/slaves among the *pinoto* if they can afford it. The *pinoto* can be divided into two categories, *jomo limo* and *jomo telu*. The slaves among the *jomo limo*, better known as *anak mas* (favorite child), resulted from a relationship between a slave woman with an independent (free) man. Meanwhile, the *jomo telu* is purchased or captured slaves. Compared to *jomo telu*, the slaves from among the *jomo limo* has a slight advantage. They cannot be traded by his owner without their consents and are also given a little space of freedom and rights to manage the welfare and enterprise of their owners as well as their owner's family. In fact, the *anak mas* may redeem or gain her independence if she is married to a free man, under a condition that the man has to pay a particular gift to the slave's owner. Slave ownership is significantly connected with power and dignity of a *datu'* or leader (Siti Aidah, 2007; Yap Beng Liang, 1993). In that sense, the number of slaves can raise the status and dignity of those concerned. However, according to Haji Mahali bin Wakmam,<sup>17</sup> at present most of the *pinoto* have upgraded themselves to *jomo pitu'*. Indirectly, this scenario caused the title to vanished. In spite of this, according to Haji Mahali, the *pinoto* descendants still exist until today and only certain people can recognize them.

It appears to the researcher that the presence of slaves in the social stratification system among the Bajau community in Kota Belud can possibly be traced or there are association with piracy and slavery activities in the

waters of Sabah and Borneo that have been detected since the reign of the Sultanate of Brunei at the end of the 16th century. The activity is said to be increasing in North Borneo around the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, due to the monopoly of European power in the Malay Archipelago which forced the local merchants to be pirates for survival. Activities of the slave dealing were regarded as part of the political system of Sulu Sultanate<sup>18</sup> and play a major role in the development of the political and economic system in general, and the influence and economic strength of a Sulu's *datu*' in particular. Due to the situation, *Syarikat Berpiagam Borneo Utara* (SBBU) or the North Borneo Chartered Company has established laws of slavery<sup>19</sup> in 1881 to decelerate the pursuits (Siti Aidah, 2007). William Pretyman's diary (Harrison, 1956; 1957; 1958;1959) also proved that the slaves had existed before the reign of SBBU in the north west coast of Borneo. In the diary, there are quite a number of incidents or law cases involving slaves being reported, such as slavery dispute, slavery struggle, slavery seizure, slavery loss, and so forth.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the four levels of hierarchy, there are also other special groups among the Bajau community. Those groups are identified as the descendants of *sheikh* and *sharif*. Besides the Bajau, both descendants also exist among the Iranun community in Kota Belud. Due to the resources or literature constraints, the researcher cannot finalize or conclude which community uses the terms first to distinguish its community members. This is because, the Bajau and the Iranun community are neighboring communities since the traditional period that might possibly create cultural diffusion in which a community is borrowing others' culture and trying to adapt it in its own. Mixed marriages between two different ethnics and between the locals and outsiders also contribute in the preservation and dissemination of *syekh* and *sharif* groups among the Bajau community. The *syekh* are of Arab descent who came to the Malay land to trade while spreading Islam, while *sharif* is a title given to prominent Arab Muslims and have spiritual privilege and ability (Muhiddin Yusin, 1990). The *sharif* descent may be traced through the legendary tale of Sharif Kebungsuan, who was known as a highly charismatic leader from the Philippines. Something that can be ascertained is that the *sharif* descendant has been around before the pre-colonial era based on the diary written by William Pretyman while serving as the first resident in Tempasuk (Kota Belud) as described previously (Harrison, 1956; 1957; 1958; 1959). In the diary, among the names that

begin with the Syarif are Syarif Jahir, Syarif Ali, Syarif Tassim, Syarif Shea, Syarif Salim, Syarif Mohamed, Syarif Hamid, Syarif Semangong and others.

## SYMBOLS OF SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN THE DEATH CUSTOM

The symbol of social hierarchy in Bajau culture can be seen in both marriage and death customs. In the death custom, it is portrayed through the artifacts or the rituals of *payung jomo matai*, *balu-balu* and *duang* (Halina Sendera, 2012; 2012).

### *Payung Jomo Matai*

The existence of *payung jomo matai* (umbrella of the dead) is to symbolize status, race, gender, etc. of the deceased in their social environment. The symbolism is demonstrated through the number of umbrella levels used. Apart from that, the preference of color in an artifact is also commonly applied by people as a symbol to represent or distinguish something. Logically, as a statement by Leach (1976: 59), all objects in the real world has the nature of color and, therefore, the use of different colors on an object or cultural artifacts are often employed as a way to classify a concept. Sometimes, certain colors are more dominant, which are more often selected than others, as Turner's research (1967: 60) who found that the colors like red, white and black are often used by Ndembu people in their cultural ritual performances.

In Bajau culture, there are usually two umbrellas that will be placed above the individual graves, one at the head part and another at the leg. The number of umbrella levels should be in an odd number and the head part must be two levels more from the leg. For example, 7-5, which mean seven levels at the head and five levels at the leg part. The knot at the very top of the umbrella represents the gender of the deceased. If it is tied, it signifies a man, and the vice-versa indicates a woman. The use of color and number of levels can also symbolizes status. The descendants of *datu'* or *jomo sepu* for example is usually symbolized by the use of white color as well as many umbrella levels, which is 13-11, 15-11 or 15-13. The use of yellow color represents the *sharif*, while the green color indicates the descendants

of *syeikh*. On the contraries, the commoners use white umbrella, and the number of level is relatively limited, typically in amounts of 9-7 for *jomo wau'* and 7-5 for *jomo pitu'*. Those of the lowest rank, the slave or servant (*jomo limo* or also known as *pinoto*) have 5-3 umbrella levels. If there are different colored umbrellas on top of the grave, it indicates that there are two different lineages which were inherited from the mother or father. For example, a combination of green-yellow colors signifies the person has *sheikh* and *sharif* descent, while the combination of yellow-white colors that have many levels represents the descendants of *datu'* and *sharif*. Thus, we can conclude that through the use of *payung jomo matai*, social stratification or hierarchy system exist in Bajau traditional culture.

### **Spreading the news of death: *Balu-balu***

After getting confirmation that someone had died, the family members will continue to spread the news of the death to other family members and relatives, whether near or far, friends and villagers using the method of verbal communication (interpersonal communication). The task is executed by family members or also through the intermediary. For those who are of *datu'* descent, news of his death will be disseminated both verbally and nonverbally as well as by the beating of *balu-balu*, that is the act of hitting the gong seven times and each beat may vary depending on the gender and age of the deceased that will be heard not only around the scene of death, but even in the neighboring villages. Customarily, the beating of *balu-balu* among the Kota Belud Bajau community is performed only among those of *datu'* descendant. A customary fine will be imposed on individuals who make *balu-balu* beats with the purpose of announcing the death of the deceased who are not of the *datu'* descendent. According to Haji Mahali bin Haji Wakmam, the fine imposed is between 5 -10 *pikul*, which is equivalent to RM100 - RM200 ringgit (1 *pikul* is equivalent to RM20) depending on the discretion of the head of all the parties involved as well as the capability (in term of monetary or economic status) of an offender. In one's death, *balu-balu* beats will be held three times; informing the news of death, the beginning of the bathing ritual and the departure of the corpse to the cemetery.

## ***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 way of serving various foods to guests. Traditionally, *duang* is wrapped in a leaf called *dun begiang*<sup>21</sup> and then *tembusa*<sup>7</sup> (a basket made from coconut leaves) take over the role of the leaf. Until today, *tembusa*<sup>7</sup> 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. The alms giving is termed by the Bajau as *duang*, i.e the provision of a variety of meals to 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). *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 cultural archipelago such as the studies done by Dzulfawati (1993; 2006), Metcalf (1991), Metcalf and Huntington (1979).

Besides that, *duang* also represents the status of the dead and those involved in the *ngeduang* ritual because usually, *ngeduang* and *mangan bangi* ritual for the dead of the higher ranking people is often held in a big way with a lot of preparation and of course it demands a lot of expenses. *Mangan bangi* in Bajau culture is also known as the feast for the deceased among the Malays, that is, conceptually, a period of mourning which is held to commemorate the passing and honor the deceased. The Bajau community held *mangan bangi* (literally means eat in a day) for seven consecutive days after completion of funeral, and on each count 10 days until the day-to-100,

namely on the day-to-10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90 and 100. Apart from that, *mangan bangi* will be held on the *temuan taun*, i.e a year after the death and on each anniversary of the death for family who can afford it. Symbolically, *duang* does not only represents the status of the deceased, but people who are still living, particularly the *duang* providers and recipients. In the *ngeduang* ritual, distribution of *duang* is based on the role played by a person in the ceremony. For the commoners, those who serve as *imam*, *tahlil* reciters etc. are considered having a more honorable position and they will receive a more special *duang* than other guests.

### SYMBOLS OF SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN THE MARRIAGE CUSTOM

In the marriage custom, the symbol of social hierarchy is manifested through *berian* or *mas kahwin*, *usungan* and *payung berjuntai* (ceremonial umbrella).

#### ***Penonggot (Berian or mas kahwin): The Wedding Offering and Gifts***

*Berian* or *mas kahwin* is considered as a wedding offering, i.e a sum of money that must be provided by the groom as an offering to the bride. Besides *mas kahwin*, there is also a wedding gift (*hantaran*) which usually cost a lot depending on the discretion and the consent of both the bride and the groom families. For the Bajau community, the wedding gifts are usually in the form of money and/or domestic animals such as cattle and/or buffalo. The *berian* or *mas kahwin* (*penonggot*) and wedding gifts given and received also vary according to one's status. The nobles often give and receive goods that are higher and larger in terms of quantity as well as quality than the commoners. For the *datu'*, their *mas kahwin* is set at 15 *pikul*, *jomo wau'* 10 *pikul*, *jomo pitu'* 7 *pikul* and *jomo pinoto* 5 *pikul*. In the customary rules, a *pikul* is equivalent to RM20.00. Therefore *mas kahwin* for the *datu'* descent is RM300.00. For the *jomo wau'*, it is set at RM200.00, while the *jomo pitu'* is RM140.00. For the *pinoto*, the *mas kahwin* is RM100.00. Other than that, usually, individuals from the *datu'* descents are not encouraged to marry people from among the *pinoto*.

According to Haji Mahali and Madam Jainisah, the traditional *berian* or *mas kahwin* (*penonggot*) of a Bajau is to be uttered and composed of various items which are valued or discussed among the wedding negotiator

based on *pikul/lukut* or *senantan*. As said before, one *pikul/lukut* is equivalent to RM20.00, whereas one *senantan* is equivalent to RM2.00. Those valued items including *kuda* (horse), *kerbau* (cow), *tawak-tawak/gong* (a kind of music instrument which has a circular shape made from bronze), *pedati/meriam kecil* (small cannon made from bronze), *rentaka/meriam besar* (a cannon made from bronze that is bigger than *pedati*), *taris/keris* (small sword), *bujak/lembing* (spear), *selapa/tepak sirih* (a bronze case or box used to place sets of betel-nut, betel leaf etc.).

For example, those from the *jomo wau*' descendant will receive a *mas kahwin* of 10 *pikul* which is valued per item more or less as the following:

<i>Kuda</i>	2 <i>pikul</i>	= RM 40
<i>Kerbau</i>	2 <i>pikul</i>	= RM 40
<i>Gong</i>	2 <i>pikul</i>	= RM 40
<i>Pedati</i>	1 <i>pikul</i>	= RM 20
<i>Rentaka</i>	1 <i>pikul</i>	= RM 20
<i>Keris</i>	1/2 <i>pikul</i> or 5 <i>senantan</i>	= RM 10
<i>Leming</i>	1/2 <i>pikul</i> or 5 <i>senantan</i>	= RM 10
<i>Selapa</i>	1 <i>pikul</i>	= RM 20
Total	<u>10 <i>pikul</i></u>	= RM200

### ***Usungan*: The Stretcher**

The *usungan* is viewed as a stretcher carrying vehicles or transportation that carries the groom to the bride's house or to bring the dead to the cemetery. According to Haji Mahali bin Wakmam, in the Bajau tradition of marriage and death, only those people from the *datu*' descendants can ride the *usungan*. The commoners cannot ride or use the *usungan* and those who disobey the rules will be fined, which is a kind of fine that is imposed on individuals who violate the traditional or customary laws. The fine for the misconduct is set to be 2 *pikul* for each person or family or equivalent to RM40.

### ***Payung Obor-Obor or Payung Berjuntai: The Ceremonial (Dangling) Umbrella***

In the marriage tradition, the *payung obor-obor* is a kind of dangling wedding umbrella used to shield the bride and only those of *datu'* descendants can use this kind of umbrella. According to Haji Mahali again, ordinary people can use the wedding umbrella, but the only difference is that the umbrella must not have any dangle on it, that is the additional accessories that hung in every corner of the umbrella. The *payung berjuntai* is commonly used above the stretcher to shield the bridegroom from the sun or rain.

#### DISCUSSION: DEPENDENCY AND SUPERIORITY

The concept of status that exists in the Bajau death and marriage customs can be seen from several perspectives; the descent or inheritance, mixed marriage and religion. Earlier description on Bajau social stratification and hierarchy system has touched on the traditional heritage of the *jomo sepu (datu')*, *jomo wau'*, *jomo pitu'* and *pinoto (jomo limo and jomo telu)*. In addition, intercultural relationships that lead to inter-marriage between certain groups among the local Bajau also create special groups such as the *sheikh* and *sharif*, which is also a heritage trait. In addition to genetic factors or family heritage, the status of the Bajau community is also determined by religious factor and in this case the Islamic title or role is used such as the *imam*, *haji*, *tahlil* reciters etc. It means that knowledge and Islamic leadership qualities possessed by someone (even among the commoner), raise his status especially in certain ceremonies or rituals.

Recognition based on ethnicity or heritage status shows that those who occupy higher hierarchical status are considered more superior, especially in terms of material and authority. In this sense, typically, people with lower status will seek help from those of the superior status. The wealth and power held by the *datu'* gives them a privilege to possess slaves from the *pinoto*. In order to sustain their lives, the *pinoto* has to serve his or her master. In this sense, the nature of dependency towards those who are more powerful seems to contribute towards the progression of social class among the Bajau community. Apart from that, the superiority concept in term of

religious aspect can also be seen in the rituals of death, for example, the role played by ritual leaders such as *imam*, *tahlil* and *yassin* reciters etc., which are considered to be more special than other guests. For example, in *ngeduang* ritual, these people will receive more *duang* and special treatment from the host. In this understanding, the nature of dependency towards this type of people is because their services are required to complete the most important parts in such event.

In addition to intercultural context and social biology, the social stratification system among the Bajau community can also be explicated through the psychocultural aspect. Yap Beng Liang (1997) who study the social values of the Bajau community stated that one of the values held by the Bajau community, especially in Kota Belud is the importance of social status, based on the existence of social strata. In this understanding, the value of status can be associated with the psychological aspect of the Bajau community especially in term of the inferiority attitude. The Bajau people dislike to be despised and they are also concerned about the perception of other people or society towards them, i.e the values that lead to human dignity. The value of status among the Bajau community as described by Yap Beng Liang, was also noticed by Gusni (2010) who studied the Bajau community in different locations, the Bajau Bone community in South Sulawesi who were willing to change their ethnic identity to Bugis because the Bugis was perceived as more superior, in terms of economic, political and other socio-cultural aspects. In addition, the better acceptance from the outsiders towards the Bugis community was also among the factors that contribute to the formation of new identities. Actually, those values are more on the Bajau's efforts to sustain their survival within the complexities of the surrounding development. Although different in geographical context, but the status-oriented attitude and dignity may be suggested as one of the factors that will strengthen the system of social stratification among the Kota Belud Bajau community. In this sense, the nature of dependency towards those who are perceived more powerful also contributed to the importance of status in social life.

In reality, it has become human nature to be proud of their descendants, particularly among the high ranking people. Interestingly, for the Bajau community, the social status is not only enjoyed during one's life but through some symbols of death, the concept of status is also prevail

until one's death. This is because even in the realm of the dead, the concept of rank is also preferred, that is when the transition from the status of the soul and spirit to *embo*.<sup>1</sup> In this case, the status of *embo* is perceived and believed as more higher than the formers because they no longer require the courtesy of a family member to live in their new world or environment. In this understanding, the nature of dependency is running in one-way.

## CONCLUSION

Bajau community is among the people of Borneo in Sabah who practises a system of social hierarchy in their cultural life, especially before and during the colonialization. From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the nature of dependency and power or superiority become the significant aspects in influencing the mindset of the Bajau community's towards the social strata system, in relation to the affairs of death and marriage customs. Gradually, the wave of modernization that swept contemporary Bajau community particularly among the commoners, makes the descendant system or social class differences become less importance in daily communication. Nowadays social status is seen to be more directed towards personal achievement, such as property or material ownership and education level. However, in certain cases, especially those involving marriage customs such as *berian* or *mas kahwin*, couples compatibility and some customary rituals of death, the strata based system is still applied at least until this research is done. As in the contemporary age nowadays, the social status is quite invisible and not declared openly. In this case, one of the easiest way to find out the status of a Bajau individual is through the given or received *mas kahwin*.<sup>22</sup> Although it is not enacted, this matter has become the Bajau customary rules until today.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Endogamy is a kind of cultural practice that encourages a person to marry someone within his/her social group such as with the same clan, religion, social class, caste or ethnic group. The opposite of this term is exogamy.

<sup>2</sup>According to the Indian caste system, there are four categories of strata namely Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. The Brahmin occupies the highest rank whereas the Sudra is the vice-versa. Under the caste system, an individual obtains a social position at birth and will remain fixed for life. However, someone can be reborn into a higher caste in a future life if he/she fulfills his/her duties sufficiently well throughout this life. Therefore, the Indian believes in the concept of reincarnation, karma and transmigration (Hunt & Collander, 2005; Haviland, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>Based on latest research and statement by Datuk Datu Tigabelas bin Datu Zainal Abidin, interviewed on July 15<sup>th</sup> 2012. Datuk Datu Tigabelas bin Datu Zainal Abidin is a Bajau of Kota Belud who has served as a Director of the Sabah Archives for more than 13 years. He retired from the post in October 2012.

<sup>4</sup>This figure is based on random assumption with yearly average growth rate of 2% .

<sup>5</sup>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 3,675 people and also of Malaysian citizen.

<sup>6</sup>This figure includes the Bajau of Tawau residency (Tawau, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna) and also Sandakan residency (Sandakan, Kinabatangan, Beluran and Tongod).

<sup>7</sup>This figure covers the Bajau of the West Coast (Kota Kinabalu, Ranau, Kota Belud, Tuaran, Penampang and Papar), Kudat (Kudat, Kota Marudu and Pitas), remote areas (Beaufort, Kuala Penyu, Sipitang, Tenom, Nabawan, Keningau and Tambunan) dan Federal Territory of Labuan.

<sup>8</sup>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 Normis Hj. Mahali (2006).

<sup>9</sup>*Jomo sepu* means the highest ranking people who are descended from those tenth people (*orang sepuluh*).

<sup>10</sup>*Jomo wau* means common people from the descendants of those eightieth people (*orang lapan*).

<sup>11</sup>*Jomo pitu* means common people from the descendants of those seventh people (*orang tujuh*).

<sup>12</sup>*Jomo limo* and *telu* means the lowest ranking people who are descended from those fifth and third people (*orang lima* and *tiga*).

<sup>13</sup>This statement maybe relevant to cover the ethnic groups along the west coast of Sabah. This is due to the fact that there are other ethnic groups that use the title, especially among the Suluk tribe at the east coast of Sabah.

<sup>14</sup>The name Datu' Rombangang (as one of the Kota Belud Bajau leader) appears many times in the diary of William Pretyman, the first British resident at Tempasuk (the former name of Kota Belud district). (Harrison, 1956; 1957; 1958). Datu' Tigabelas is a great grandchild of Datu' Rombangang, i.e Datu' Tigabelas bin Datu' Zainal Abidin bin Datu' Tekupan bin Datu Rombangang.

<sup>15</sup>Jainisah Nurajin is a Bajau of Kota Belud who had implemented an academic exercise about the kinship and marriage among the Bajau of Kota Belud in the 1970s. She was the first Bajau woman and among the earliest Sabahan woman that graduated from Universiti of Malaya. She was the former director of Sabah Woman Affairs (1994-1996).

<sup>16</sup>Among the contemporary Bajau, the title *pinoto* is actually something that can be considered taboo because it means something negative. Therefore, this title is not spoken as much as possible to avoid feelings of inferiority among this group.

<sup>17</sup>Haji Mahali bin Wakmam was a former teacher and has a considerable knowledge of Bajau customary affairs. He often serves as one of the important persons involved in Bajau customary rituals and gatherings at Kampung Kota Belud.

<sup>18</sup>Apart from Sultanate of Brunei, Sabah was also under the reign of Sultanate of Sulu, when the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Muhiuddin gave most of the east coast of Sabah to the Sultan of Sulu in the 19th century as recompense for the good deed and services he played during the struggle for the throne of Brunei Sultanate (Siti Aidah, 2007).

<sup>19</sup>Based on the law, a slave cannot be traded or made a slave without his consent. The slave cannot be also separated from his family when it was sold or at the time he handed to his owner. Slavery law was amended in 1883 which, *inter alia* stated that all slaves brought to Sabah would be released and the people of Sabah are not allowed to buy a slave (Siti Aidah, 2007: 54).

<sup>20</sup>Explanation about slave was mentioned in the diary of W. Pretyman (1878-1880), for example in diary I, page 364 (Harrison, 1956), diary II, pp. 205, 229 (Harrison, 1957) and diary III, page 338 (Harrison, 1958).

<sup>21</sup>*Dun begiang* is a species of taro leaf forest.

<sup>22</sup>According to an informant, Puan Hasrina bin Datu' Golkhan (who got the *datu*' descendant from her father's side), the *mas kahwin* or *penonggot* that she received while married to a commoner in 1997 is RM300.00 and the amount is stated in her legal marriage document (*surat nikah*). She also claimed that the amount is still applied in the marriage among the *datu*' descendant until today.

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