

Symbolism in the Queen of Lepa as the Regatta Lepa Festival of Bajau Semporna Community

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.808097>

Received: 13 August 2024; Accepted: 24 August 2024; Published: 31 August 2024

ABSTRACT

The Regatta Lepa, also known as the Sambulayang Festival, is a celebration of the Bajau community in Semporna, Sabah. This event symbolises a way of life that embodies the people's history and cultural heritage. Various activities are held during the Regatta Lepa, including water sports, the parade of the most beautiful lepa, and the Queen of Lepa contest. Previous research indicates that many important questions about the meaning of the Queen of Lepa have not yet been fully explored in relation to this celebration. Bajau girls in Semporna are highly enthusiastic about competing in this contest and winning the title of Queen of Lepa. Therefore, this study will examine the symbolism and uniqueness of the Queen of Lepa in the context of the Lepa Regatta. It will also thoroughly identify the distinctive attire and jewellery worn by the Queen of Lepa. An in-depth discussion of the symbolism and uniqueness of the Queen of Lepa clothing and jewellery has revealed that these elements are not solely for the competition but carry symbolic meanings that reflect the identity of the Bajau people. Furthermore, the Queen of Lepa herself symbolises the Regatta Lepa celebration. This research will adopt a quantitative approach, including fieldwork such as interview with informants and observation for data collection purposes.

Keywords: queen of lepa, regatta lepa, culture, bajau

INTRODUCTION

The Regatta Lepa or also known as the Sambulayang Festival is a celebration of the Bajau community in Semporna, Sabah. This festival is a way of life that symbolizes the nation's history and heritage. There are various events celebrated in the Regatta Lepa festival and one of activities is the Queen of Lepa Competition. Through the history of the Bajau community in Semporna, the Queen of Lepa is related to the legendary story of Arung Salamiyah in the 18th century. Her prowess in the art of Igal-igal dance (one of the traditional dances of the Bajau community) has elevated her to the title of Queen of Lepa and now has become part of the compulsory event that is contested in the Regatta Lepa festival.

The Queen of Lepa competition held in conjunction with the Regatta Lepa festival is eagerly awaited by the girls in Semporna. This participation is an opportunity to win the title Queen of Lepa. This is because, the greatness of a dancer of various types of Igal-igal dance is measured through the title of Queen of Lepa. Despite of this, there are not many studies that explain the symbolism behind the Queen of Lepa in the Regatta Lepa festival. Most studies focus on the Regatta Lepa festival which focuses on cultural elements such as Sambulayang, equipment or Lepa itself. Therefore, the objectives of the study are to examine the symbolism and special features of the Queen of Lepa in the Regatta Lepa Festival and to identify the uniqueness of the fashion and jewellery used by the Queen of Lepa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of the Regatta Lepa festival and the Queen of Lepa who competed in the Regatta Lepa festival is not a new study in culture of the Bajau community at Semporna, Sabah. There are several previous studies about the way of life, economic and social of those associated with the festival. However, through detailed

observation, there has not been a holistic and comprehensive discussion on the Queen of Lepa and the uniqueness of the fashion and jewellery used by the Queen of Lepa. This is because, the Queen of Lepa is also one of the mandatory things in the organization of the Regatta Lepa festival.

Based on Ismail Ali (2010), it is stated that "lepa" and "sambulayang" are two icons that cannot be separated from the Bajau tribe in Semporna, Sabah and are synonymous with the Bajau Laut culture which is translated through the "Lepa Regatta". Therefore, this study was conducted following the impressions and interpretations of some other Bajau tribes (Bajau Darat) who claim that the culture of "Lepa" and "Sambulayang" is not actually the heritage of the Bajau Laut but belongs to the Bajau Land (Bajau Kubang).

Aisa Abd Halim (2018) conducted a study by examining the motives and meanings behind the lepa carving art of the Bajau Semporna community which is less emphasized and highlighted to the general public, especially the younger generation. This study also investigates aspects of local culture that influence the meaning of motifs in lepa carvings. This study also uses qualitative research methods by using interview, observation, photo and video recording methods in data collection. The findings show that the motifs synonymous with the lepa carvings are closely related to the daily life of the Semporna community.

Maylinda Burhan Nurdin (2015) identified steps that could help to introduce the Regatta Lepa Festival at the international level. This study was conducted with the aim of achieving three objectives; to study the effectiveness of the promotion system used by the festival, to identify the support given by the government and support needed by the Regatta Lepa festival, and the impact of the festival on the community and other parties. In this study, the researcher used qualitative and quantitative methods, interviews, questionnaires, and a total of 150 respondents involved for the purpose of data collection for this study. Therefore, there is still a research group in the Bajau community in the Regatta Lepa festival, especially the symbolism of the Queen of Lepa which is a mandatory event to compete in this festival. In addition, there is still less research related to the uniqueness of the Queen Lepa's fashion. There is also research on ethnic clothing, but it does not touch Bajau ethnic clothing.

Juslin, Ismail Ibrahim, & Toeu (2019) have done a study related to ethnic fashion in Sabah, but it touches on the Murut ethnicity. This study in the field of art aims to document the variety of traditional Murut sub-ethnic clothing. Through this study, the researcher aims to explore the conceptual models, accessories and ornaments that decorate the Murut sub-ethnic clothing and thus identify related terms. This study has used field methods in obtaining data. Based on the data obtained, it was found that the uniqueness of traditional Murut clothing can be seen based on the composition of the accessories displayed, namely on the head, neck, waist, hands and feet. In addition, the composition of accessories can be further highlighted by the colour black which is the background colour of the traditional Murut clothing. This study indirectly managed to gather many terms related to the traditional Murut clothing.

Adilah Jusoh and Fazilah Hussin (2016) further examine fashion through literary texts. This study aims to identify the types of fashion images narrated in the Malay Manuscript of the Great Poem, describe the materials, patterns, colours and manufacture of fashion as well as analyse the function of fashion described to the community in the text. Based on the method of text analysis and aesthetic approach, this study succeeded in finding various types of fashion categorized into clothing, jewellery and equipment. The Malay manuscripts of the Great Poems are found to display many depictions of fashion that have similarities in terms of meaning and function. Other parts of fashion have different meanings and usages or are no longer used in the current context. Although this study examines traditional Malay clothing, the fashion concepts found in this study, especially related to clothing and jewellery, can be applied in Kadazan Penampang fashion terminology.

Overall, there is no holistic and comprehensive discussion on the symbolism Queen of Lepa in Regatta Lepa festival and the uniqueness of the fashion, jewellery used by the Queen of Lepa.

METHODOLOGY

Sulaiman Masri (2005), data collection is a process of collecting variables and the researcher will determine the procedures, techniques and aspects of data collection that are suitable for the study. This study was

conducted in Semporna district which is located at the East coast of Sabah where the majority are occupied by the Bajau community. This study is the qualitative studies that can explain the symbolism of the Queen of Lepa in the Regatta Lepa Festival thus describing the clothing used by the Queen Lepa. In addition, data collection for this study involves two methods, which is library research method and the interview method with informants.

According to Mohd Shaffie (1991), library research is a method used by a researcher or writer to obtain data and evidence through the study of existing documents and records. Previous studies are used as the main source of reference to understand and deepen the aspects to be studied. The results show that the research related to the symbolism of the Queen of Lepa is still not being carried out even though there are studies related to the Lepa Regatta festival, and the same goes to studies related to the uniqueness of Bajau ethnic clothing.

Next, this study also used interview methods with informants to obtain detailed data. Some unstructured questions are prepared to be asked to the informants. The use of this interview method is used as the main method due to the lack of data and important written information about the symbolic study of the Queen of Lepa in the Regatta Lepa Festival. Two informants were used in this study, of which the informant is the winner of the 2019 Regatta Lepa competition and Bajau people.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A) Symbolism of the Queen of Lepa in Regatta Lepa Festival

The Queen of Lepa is a title given to a native Bajau girl who is good at dancing various types of *Igal-igal* dances such as Igal Tabawan, Igal Limbangan, Igal Lellang and Igal Tarirai. Originally this Queen of Lepa was part of the decoration for Lepa (boat) who competed in the festival. The fully dressed Queen Lepa will dance on a moving boat and need stability during the Lepa parade in the festival. Nowadays, the Queen of Lepa is not only a decoration on Lepa but has been raised to be the symbolic in the Lepa Regatta festival where this Queen of Lepa has been made a part of the event contested in the festival. This Queen of Lepa competition has started in 2003 until now.

The Queen of Lepa who was crowned as the winner was judged based on a few criteria, namely authenticity. Participants need to be skilled in performing dance points such as Tarirai point, Limbayan point and Tabawan point accompanied by Kulintangan musical instruments and need to present thoughtful and skillful answers in answering the questions given. In addition, participants must also have an attractive personality and be able to communicate well. This is said to be so because the contestant chosen to be the Queen of Lepa will be appointed as a promotional and marketing model to introduce the uniqueness of the Bajau community in Semporna.

B) Uniqueness of Queen Lepa's Costume and Jewellery

According to Mohd Rosli Saludin (2004), fashion or costume is clothing that consists of clothes and fabric, in addition to jewellery, make-up equipment and head ornaments. In addition, Mohd Rosli Saludin, (2004) also stated that clothing also includes aspects of ethics and manners. The uniqueness of the Queen Lepa's fashion and jewellery reflects the identity of the Bajau tribe in Semporna. The identity and culture of the Bajau Semporna community can be interpreted through their traditional clothing which is a lifestyle related to maritime activities, such as fishing and living close to the sea. According to the informant, the clothing of the Bajau tribe which is often worn when performing the Igal-igal dance or worn during the Regatta Lepa festival or wedding ceremony, is called Ala Bimbang clothing.

Ala Bimbang costume is a traditional clothing specific to the Bajau community. This Ala Bimbang clothing is not just the clothes used by the Queen of Lepa and the Bajau community. Ala Bimbang clothing brings with it deep cultural values and artistic heritage. This is said to be so because the engraving on the dress must follow *Bajau Ukilan* (carving) which is closely related to the *Igal-igal* dance. If we see the production of this fashion, it tends to have carvings inspired by nature elements such as sea water, waves and wind. This carving is not

only considered as decoration, but also to unite the clothes with the surrounding environment.

According to the informan, Ala Bimbang fashion has different prices depending on the carving or pattern chosen which is approximately RM 1200 to RM 1800. The more complicated and many carvings or patterns are chosen, the higher the value of the fashion. The selection of more complicated patterns or carvings usually requires more effort and a relatively long period of time, which is around a week to a month. The uniqueness of this fashion also includes the manufacture of additional accessories needed to complete the appearance of Ala Bimbang which requires a long process.

Ala Bimbang



Fig. 1 Full set Ala Bimbang costume

The picture above shows the complete full set of Ala Bimbang costume used by Queen of Lepa in the Regatta Lepa festival. According to informant, Ala Bimbang costume initially only had a few specific colours such as black, golden yellow, red, and dark red. In addition, each of the original colours has its own meaning. For example, black is considered an important basic colour in Ala Bimbang fashion. Black colour often symbolizes maturity, seriousness or authority in many cultures. Golden yellow is a colour that is often associated with wealth, luxury, and majesty. The use of golden yellow in Ala Bimbang clothing reflects the values of nobility or beauty that are valued in the culture. Red is usually a colour that has a strong emotional meaning, such as courage, passion, or warmth. The use of red is considered to give a bold or enthusiastic effect when performing Igal-igal. While dark red is often associated with stability, courage, and earth. This colour gives a traditional element and balance to Ala Bimbang fashion.

In addition, Ala Bimbang is made from velvet fabric, cotton fabric or satin fabric. The selection of Ala Bimbang fabric depends on the wearer of the dress. If you look at the first dress in the picture above, the shirt is made of satin fabric while the skirt is made of cotton fabric. There are several important aspects that must be presented in a set of Ala Bimbang clothing, namely Ala Bimbang, *Jabbang*, *Gandik* or *Mahakutta*, *Bungkah*, *Salung Kukku* or *Janggai* and *Kambot*.

Part of Ala Bimbang

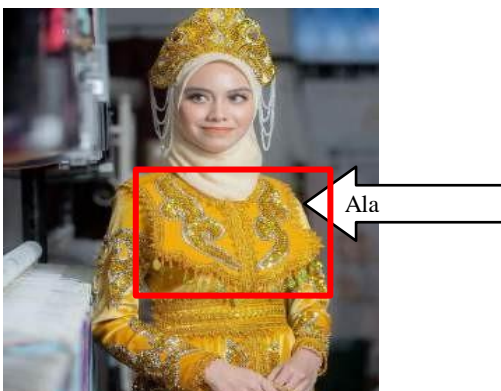


Fig. 2 Ala Bimbang

The picture above shows part of the costume called Ala Bimbang used by the Queen of Lepa. Ala Bimbang refers to the part of the front layer that is placed on the chest part of the dress which refers to something used to cover or decorate the chest part of the dress. In this context, the study informant stated that the use of Ala Bimbang on the chest part of the dress is intended to keep the wear so that it always looks decent and does not go beyond the limits.

In addition, the carvings produced on Ala Bimbang are also made according to the Bajau's tribe carvings. According to informants, the carvings are inspired by nature, including elements such as sea water, waves, wind, and animals such as eagles. Based on the picture above, the carvings on Ala Bimbang show the flowing water. In this context, the flowing water is like the movement of the Igal which is always flowing or always moving according to the rhythm of the point (beat) or song.

Gandik, Jabbang or Mahakutta



Fig. 3 Gandik, Jabbang atau Mahakutta

Bungkah (Bangle)



Fig. 4 Bungkah (Bangle)

Ornaments on the head is one of the important aspects of a fashion aimed at highlighting the identity of a culture. According to the informant of this study, there are several terms used by the Bajau tribe community to refer to their head ornaments, that is Gandik, Jabbang, or Mahakutta. Although these terms vary depending on the Bajau sub- ethnicity, they all refer to head ornaments. In addition, carvings on Gandik also use paste beads like carvings on Ala Bimbang. The beads will be pasted to the same engraving or pattern as Ala Bimbang which is according to the pattern of nature as well such as sea water, waves and wind or animals such as eagles.

Salung Kukku or Janggai



Fig. 5: Salung Kukku or Janggai

Salung Kukku or Janggai is also one of the ornaments that must be worn when styling Ala Bimbang fashion. The word "Salung" refers to sheaths, while the word "Kukku" refers to the word nails. "Janggai" is another name for Salung Kukku that refers to very long nails. Salung Kukku or Janggai is a traditional accessory that is important in Ala Bimbang fashion. The two names used as "Salung Kukku" and "Janggai," reflect dialect variations or terms used by sub-ethnic groups in the Bajau community.

Salung Kukku or Janggai is made from aluminum that be shaped as a very long sharp nail. According to the informant, there is no specific machine to produce the Salung Kukku or Janggai, instead it is made by hand and only uses some tools such as knives, scissors and scrapers to produce the shape of the Janggai. Nail sheaths were used by Queen of Lepa to show off her long fingers.

Kambot (Belt)



Fig. 6 Kambot (Belt)

Bungkah or known as a bangle is one of the important pieces of jewellery that should be worn in Ala Bimbang sets. These bangles show a special touch to the whole look and are considered as an element that cannot be ignored. The informant added, the absence of bangle can make Ala Bimbang's clothes incomplete. Therefore, the bangle is considered an important element that completes the whole outfit.

Kambot in the Bajau language means belt. Kambot is also one of the accessories that need to be worn to complete the set of Ala Bimbang fashion. According to the informant of this study, the Kambot is made of the same fabric as the Ala Bimbang costume and there is the use of hard paper to make the shape of the Kambot looks neat and rest on the wearer's body. The pattern and decoration of Kambot is usually the same as the pattern on Ala Bimbang, which is not much different, especially in terms of colour, pattern and beads used.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Queen of Lepa is one of the important elements that completes the Regatta Lepa Festival. Although in the beginning, the Queen of Lepa only played a role as one of the decorations in the Lepa (boat) that was contested, but nowadays, the Queen of Lepa has become one of the mandatory competitions when the Regatta Lepa Festival is celebrated. Furthermore, the winner of the Queen of Lepa will be appointed as a promotional and marketing model to introduce the uniqueness of the Bajau community in Semporna. In terms of the costume or fashion shown by the Queen of Lepa, it consists of several main aspects that must be presented in the costume, such as Ala Bimbang, Gandik or Mahakutta, Salung Kukku or Janggai, Bungkah and Kambot. All these accessories must be presented to complete the set of Ala Bimbang costume of the Bajau community. Through this study, it is not only for the needs of documenting the heritage of the Bajau race in Semporna, but also benefits the economic generation of the state of Sabah through the tourism sector in Sabah, especially Semporna.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researcher extends their utmost gratitude to academy of language studies (APB) for all the assist and guidance with grant application for this research

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