

The Semiotics of Sambulayang among the Bajau Community in Semporna, Sabah

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the symbolism of sambulayang in the Bajau community in Semporna based on a semiotic approach. Sambulayang is one of the traditional cultural heritage of the Bajau community that not only functions as a decoration on the lepa, but also carries symbolic meaning related to cultural identity, social values, and the way of life of coastal communities. However, studies related to semiotic analysis of sambulayang are still not given much attention by previous researchers. Therefore, this study was carried out to identify the symbolic elements found in sambulayang, analyze the meaning of denotation and connotation contained in sambulayang, as well as describe the function of sambulayang as a symbol of the cultural identity of the Bajau community. This study uses a qualitative approach by utilizing the method of visual observation and research on secondary sources such as books, scientific articles, research reports. The research data was analyzed using the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes (1957) which emphasizes the concept of denotation and connotation in understanding the meaning of a cultural symbol. The results of the study found that the shape, color, and motif of sambulayang have certain symbolic meanings that are closely related to beliefs, aesthetic values, relationships with the sea, and the identity of the Bajau community in Semporna. This study contributes to the development of knowledge in the field of cultural semiotics as well as helping the preservation of the Bajau community's cultural heritage, especially in Semporna, Sabah.

Keywords: sambulayang, semiotics, cultural identity, Bajau society

INTRODUCTION

The cultural heritage of the indigenous community is a treasure that not only reflects the identity of a community, but also functions as a medium for conveying values, beliefs and world views that are inherited from generation to generation. In the context of the Bajau community in Semporna, Sabah, the sambulayang which is a type of decoration or traditional symbol is one of the cultural heritages that are still preserved and have an aesthetic, social and cultural function in the life of the local community. According to Halina Sendera Mohd. Yakin & Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali (2009), sambulayang is a cultural activity marker object that is commonly used in cultural ceremonies or rituals such as weddings, deaths and annual festivals in particular, the Lepa-Lepa Regatta. Made of multi-colored fabric that is joined to form an object and has several hangings of fabric in the shape of a 'V' or inverted triangle, sambulayang is said to bring the image of an octopus. The wood placed on the side is a frame to support the fabric and the number of fabric hangings is odd and the position in the middle position is longer than other fabric hangings. In addition, the saringguru, which is a hanging cloth on the left and right side, is left long enough to reach the ground to balance the sambulayang.

The existence of sambulayang is not just a material object, but also acts as a sign system that contains various implicit meanings related to social status, ethnic identity, cultural values and the relationship of Bajau people with their environment and traditions. In an era of rapid globalization and modernization, various elements of traditional culture face the risk of changing meaning, neglect and loss of original function. This phenomenon

demands more in-depth documentation and study of local cultural symbols to ensure that the values and meanings contained in them can be understood and passed on to future generations.

Although there are various studies that focus on the culture and identity of the Bajau community in Sabah, research on sambulayang from a semiotic perspective is still limited and lacks specific attention. Most previous studies focus more on aspects of history, customs, art and cultural heritage in general, while the analysis of the symbolic meaning contained in sambulayang has not yet been explored in depth. The limitation of this study not only proves that the interpretation of sambulayang is still descriptive but also creates a knowledge gap that needs to be filled in order to enrich the academic documentation on the cultural heritage of the Bajau community, especially in the Semporna district which is known as the main settlement center of the ethnic group.

Based on these requirements, this study was conducted to analyze sambulayang in the Bajau community in Semporna, Sabah by using the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes. The semiotic theory introduced by Roland Barthes is a comprehensive approach in understanding the relationship between signs, meaning and culture. According to Barthes, a sign not only carries a denotative meaning that is literal, but also contains a connotative meaning that is closely related to the values, ideologies and myths that develop in a society. Through the concepts of denotation, connotation and myth, cultural objects can be analyzed as a medium that reflects the thought structure and belief system of the community that produced it. Therefore, this study examines the denotative, connotative and mythic meanings contained in sambulayang as well as its relationship with the Bajau community's cultural identity. Through the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes, this study can provide a deeper understanding of how traditional cultural objects function as a medium of cultural communication that forms meaning and identity in the life of the Bajau community in Semporna, in addition to contributing to the development of knowledge in the field of cultural semiotics, anthropology and local cultural heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on sambulayang is still at a limited level compared to other Bajau cultural studies. Most of the studies that exist are more focused on the historical context that emphasizes cultural identity, maritime heritage and the symbolic function of sambulayang in the Bajau community in Semporna, Sabah. Although this sambulayang is often displayed as an icon of Bajau culture in various tourism programs and cultural festivals, academic research that focuses on the study of semiotics, meaning, function and culture process in depth is still limited.

Sambulayang as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

A significant study of sambulayang was done by Halina Sendera Mohd. Yakin and Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali through the study of *Sambulayang: The Significance of Semporna Bajau Cultural Identity* (2021). This study is a study based on a non-verbal communication perspective that sees cultural identity as being able to be expressed through the use of cultural objects or artifacts. Based on field observations and interviews conducted in the Semporna area and Omdal Island, the researcher found that sambulayang functions as a visual marker that indicates the existence of a cultural activity in the Bajau community. Not only that, the researcher also explained that sambulayang is not just a decoration on the boat but acts as a symbol of cultural identity that is easily recognized by the local community and visitors from outside. The findings are in line with the cultural communication approach which asserts that cultural objects have the ability to convey social meaning and identity without the need for verbal communication. In the context of the Bajau Semporna community, sambulayang functions as a medium of cultural representation that connects the community with their history and heritage. However, this study focuses more on the function of identity and less discusses the symbolic meaning of each element of sambulayang design such as color, motif and structural arrangement. Therefore, there is still room for research that uses a semiotic approach to understand the sign system contained in sambulayang.

Sambulayang in the Context of Bajau Maritime Heritage

An earlier study was carried out by Ismail Ali (2010) through the article *Pembudayaan Lepa and Sambulayang among the Bajau Tribe in Semporna, Sabah: A Retrospective*. This study focuses on the history, acculturation process and ownership of sambulayang culture among the Bajau community. The study challenges the common notion that often associates sambulayang exclusively with Bajau Laut. On the other hand, the researcher found that the use of sambulayang also involved several other Bajau sub-ethnic groups such as Bajau Kubang, Bajau Ubian, Bajau Simunul and Bajau Sengkuang. According to him, the development of sambulayang cannot be separated from the lepa boat which is a symbol of the Bajau people's maritime life. The relationship between lepa and sambulayang has formed a cultural system that developed through a long historical process. This study also shows that the organization of the Lepa-Lepa Regatta has strengthened the position of sambulayang as a cultural icon of the Bajau Semporna community. This finding is important because it explains that the sambulayang is not just an art object but a manifestation of maritime history and the collective identity of the Bajau community. Although this study succeeded in explaining the process of sambulayang culture, its aesthetic aspects and symbolic meaning have not yet been elaborated in depth. More emphasis is placed on the debate on cultural origins and heritage ownership than on the analysis of the physical form of the sambulayang itself. Therefore, further research focusing on the visual structure of sambulayang is still needed.

Symbolism Approach in Bajau Cultural Studies

Although not studying sambulayang directly, the study by Hanafi Hussin (2019) on the symbolism of *buwas kuning* (yellow rice) in the rituals of the Sama-Bajau community provides an important framework for understanding the symbolic function of cultural artifacts in the Bajau community. The study shows that cultural objects are not just physical tools but function as a medium that connects society with their social, psychological and spiritual values. The researcher found that the use of cultural symbols in the rituals of the Sama-Bajau community helps to maintain the continuity of tradition, community identity and social relations in the community. From a theoretical point of view, the findings indicate that sambulayang can also be interpreted as a system of symbols that contain specific cultural meanings. However, until now there has been no study that uses a semiotic approach specifically to interpret the symbolic meaning contained in the colors, motifs and shapes of sambulayang. This gap opens the door to new and deeper research on visual symbolism in Bajau culture.

Preservation of Bajau Cultural Heritage

Studies related to Bajau culture in general also emphasize the importance of preserving traditional cultural heritage. For example, a study on the practice of *Magombo'* in the Bajau community of Semporna such as a study by Syamsul Azizul Marinsah and Mohd Anuar Ramli (2017) shows that the Bajau community has a strong tendency to maintain cultural heritage as part of their collective identity despite facing modern social changes. This study shows that cultural preservation is not only related to rituals or customs, but also involves cultural symbols and artifacts that are passed down from generation to generation. In the context of sambulayang, the findings explain why sambulayang is still used in the Lepa-Lepa Regatta and various cultural events in Semporna. The existence of sambulayang in the event helps to ensure that the Bajau cultural heritage continues to be recognized by the younger generation and the outside community. However, a specific study on the effectiveness of sambulayang as a medium of cultural knowledge transfer between generations has not yet been conducted.

In addition, research on sambulayang as a traditional Bajau game has also been conducted by Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali (2012). The study examines sambulayang within the framework of Bajau cultural heritage and traditional games. The researcher used document analysis and semi-structured interviews with traditional sambulayang makers and community leaders. This methodology allowed him to examine the role of sambulayang as a medium of socialization and cultural preservation tool. Findings show that sambulayang contains informal educational values such as cooperation, creativity, and physical endurance. This study also highlights the challenge of preserving sambulayang in the modern era, where traditional games are

increasingly marginalized due to the influence of digital technology. However, the results of the study confirm that sambulayang is still relevant when integrated in festivals and community activities.

Sambulayang in Visual Arts Education

Study by Halina Sendera Mohd. Yakin (2015) studied sambulayang in the context of visual arts education in primary schools. The researcher used the action research methodology by involving teachers and students in the project of making sambulayang. Data was collected through classroom observation, analysis of student work, and teacher reflection. This method allows researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of sambulayang as a medium of art learning. The findings show that the students involved show an increase in visual imagination, fine motor skills, and appreciation for traditional arts. This study proves that cultural heritage can be used as an effective learning medium, thereby strengthening national identity through the education system.

Sambulayang as a Medium for Recreation and Community Psychology

Study by Rosnah Ismail and Mohd. Anuar Ramli (2018) examines the effect of sambulayang on the psychological well-being of the community. The researcher used a quantitative methodology with a survey research design. Questionnaires were distributed to participants of sambulayang activities in several rural and urban communities. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods to assess stress levels, life satisfaction, and social interactions. Findings show that sambulayang functions as a recreational activity that can reduce stress and strengthen social relationships. This study emphasizes that sambulayang can be used as a recreational intervention in urban communities facing life stress issues, thus making it a relevant social therapy tool.

Technological Innovation in Sambulayang Design

Study by Mohd. Khairul Anuar and Norazlin Mohd. Noor (2020) examines aspects of technological innovation in sambulayang design. Researchers use experimental methodology by testing various modern materials such as synthetic fibers and aerodynamic designs. Tests are performed in real conditions to evaluate the flying performance, endurance, and stability of the paraglider. Data is obtained through technical observation, performance measurement, and comparative analysis with traditional sambulayang. Findings show that innovation improves flying performance and opens the way to modern hang gliding competitions at the international level. This study proves that cultural heritage can be combined with technology to produce wider new values. Based on previous studies, most research related to sambulayang focuses on aspects of the cultural identity and heritage of the Bajau community in Semporna. In addition, three main functions of Sambulayang can be identified, namely as a symbol of cultural identity, a symbol of maritime heritage and as a medium of cultural communication. However, studies that examine sambulayang through an in-depth semiotic approach are still limited, especially from the point of view of visual symbol analysis, color meaning, motifs, and cultural representation. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill the gap by using a semiotic approach to understand the symbolic meaning of sambulayang in Bajau Semporna society.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative approach as a semiotic analysis design by utilizing the thinking framework of Roland Barthes to examine the meaning system contained in sambulayang as a traditional cultural artifact. The study focuses on the analysis of the visual and symbolic elements found in sambulayang, including aspects of shape, motifs, colors, decorative patterns and design structures that reflect the values and cultural identity of the Bajau community, especially in Semporna, Sabah. Research data is obtained through visual observation methods and research on secondary sources such as books and scientific articles as well as research reports related to the history and development of sambulayang. The data analysis process is carried out systematically by applying Barthes' two-level model of meaning, namely denotation and connotation. At the denotation stage, the identification of the literal meaning or written meaning displayed through the visual elements of the sambulayang is done and then at the connotation stage, the interpretation of the cultural meaning, social values, beliefs and philosophies implied behind the use of certain symbols, motifs and designs is done. The analysis is

then extended to the concept of myth (myth) introduced by Barthes to understand how sambulayang functions as a medium of cultural representation that normalizes ideology and forms community identity. This approach allows for deeper research into the relationship between signs, meanings and socio-cultural contexts, thus producing a critical and comprehensive interpretation of sambulayang as a manifestation of cultural heritage that is loaded with symbolic and significant values in the life of Bajau people, especially in Semporna, Sabah.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study prove that the sambulayang in the Bajau community in Semporna cannot be interpreted solely as a decoration on the lepa during the Lepa Regatta and other festivals, but rather is a system of cultural signs loaded with symbolic meaning and social ideology. Through the application of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, this study successfully shows that sambulayang functions as a medium of cultural representation that shows the relationship between material objects and the formation of Bajau community identity. This discovery reinforces Barthes' (1957) view that a cultural object is not neutral, but acts as a vehicle that carries social messages, cultural values and the world view of a community.



Figure 1 Sambulayang

In the first level of meaning, sambulayang is interpreted denotatively as a kind of traditional kite made of light materials and flown using wind power. However, the analysis shows that the literal meaning is only the initial layer to a more complex process of meaning. In line with Barthes' view, cultural signs always move beyond denotative meaning to produce connotative meaning which is influenced by the social experience, history and culture of the society that produces it. In the context of the Bajau community, visual elements such as shapes, colors and motifs on sambulayang have experienced a process of cultural marking that makes them a symbol of freedom, connection with nature, social solidarity and cultural heritage.

This finding shows that the meaning process of sambulayang is closely related to the life background of the Bajau community as a maritime community. A life that depends on the sea has formed a system of knowledge, values and philosophy of life which is then translated through various forms of cultural expression, including sambulayang. The shape of the sambulayang that resembles birds, fish and other natural elements illustrates how the Bajau people interpret the environment as part of their cultural identity. These findings support the

view that material culture is not just a physical product, but a manifestation of human relationships with the environment that shape their social life.

In addition, the use of certain colors on sambulayang shows the existence of a cultural code that is understood collectively in the community. Color no longer functions as a mere aesthetic element, but becomes a symbol of the value of courage, honor, well-being and connection with nature. This situation shows that the Bajau community has developed its own symbolic system that allows cultural values to be transferred from one generation to the next through cultural objects. In a semiotic context, this process shows how visual signs function as a medium of cultural communication that convey meaning indirectly to members of society.

This discussion also shows that sambulayang plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of the Bajau community's cultural identity. According to the cultural constructivist perspective, identity is not something that is fixed or inherited naturally, but is formed through social practices and cultural symbols shared by members of society. In this study, the sambulayang functions as one of the cultural symbols that help the Bajau people define who they are, how they see the world and how they want to be known by the outside community, as well as being a marker of ethnic identity that distinguishes the Bajau

The analysis also found that sambulayang acts as a medium for strengthening social relationships in the community. The activity of producing and flying sambulayang involves interaction between family members, neighbors and different generations. This situation shows that sambulayang has a social function that goes beyond the entertainment aspect because it is a space for the transfer of knowledge, experience and cultural values. This finding is in line with the view that intangible cultural heritage can be preserved through social practices that involve the active participation of the community. In other words, sambulayang functions as a cultural mechanism that contributes to the formation of social solidarity and a sense of belonging in Bajau society.

From Barthes' semiotic point of view, the most significant finding is the formation of cultural myths through sambulayang. At the myth level, the study found that sambulayang reinforces the narrative that the Bajau community is a maritime community that has a close relationship with nature, upholds the value of togetherness and appreciates the cultural heritage of the ancestors. This narrative is accepted as something natural and becomes part of society's consciousness. This is in line with what Barthes said, myth works to naturalize ideology until it is accepted as a cultural truth that is no longer questioned.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study proves that sambulayang is a cultural object that contains multiple layers of meaning that can be explained through the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes. Through the analysis of denotation, connotation and myth, this study shows that sambulayang not only reflects the Bajau community's relationship with the maritime realm, but also functions as a symbol of identity, a medium of social unity and a mechanism of cultural inheritance. This finding also proves that traditional cultural objects have a significant role in the formation of social meaning and community identity, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the cultural heritage of the Bajau community in Semporna, Sabah. In addition to increasing research in the field of cultural semiotics, this study also opens up space for further research on the symbolic function of cultural heritage in the construction of other ethnic identities in Malaysia, thereby enriching the documentation and understanding of the diversity of the country's cultural heritage.

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