

The Semiotic of Bangkai-Bangkaian: A Special Space for the Spirit

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to ethnographically describe the ritual of death among the West Coast Bajau in Sabah especially on the matters related to the preparation of *bangkai-bangkaian* after a funeral. This cultural artifact is perceived as a resting place or 'special space' for a spirit which is believed will visit his or her family members during special feast and occasion known as *bejogo*, *mangan bangi* and *malam tujuh*. Apart from that, *bangkai-bangkaian* also symbolizes the values of love, care and respect for the dead. Symbolically, the act of preparing *bangkai-bangkaian* also reflects the world-view of the Bajau. The discussion also covers the concept of spirit's space among other ethnic groups in Sabah. The data were gathered through interviews and participant observations carried out in Kampung Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia. The qualitative description were analyzed and elucidated based on semiotic and non-verbal communication perspectives.

Keywords: Bajau, Death Ritual, *Bangkai- Bangkaian*, Semiotic, Non-verbal Communication

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1. Introduction

Semiotic referring to meanings of symbols and humans as creators and meaning givers to symbols are two inseparable entities in a life of a cultured civilization. In reality, humans live with symbols and signs. Death symbols are among the significant symbols signifying a culture. Generally, death symbolizes sadness and people have different ways to manage, handle and signify death. Like other ethnics in Malaysia, ethnics in Sabah have their own unique death rituals. The Bajau or *Sama* is one of the ethnics in Sabah that has this unique death ritual. Thus, this article discusses death symbols of Bajau specifically the artifact of death culture called *bangkai-bangkaian*.

Based on the intended objective, the researchers have applied some interrelated theoretical perspectives, namely the Semiotic Theory and Nonverbal Communication Approach, to conduct and support the focus of the study and also to act as a foundation to search for the meaning of death symbol. This qualitative research utilized the ethnographical thick description approach to illustrate and interpret the semiotic meanings behind the death symbol of *bangkai-bangkaian*. In line with the ethnographical approach, the data collection is conducted through participant observation and interview. Besides that, interpretation from both etic and emic perspectives are also employed to describe the data.

2. The Bajau in General

In most western writings or researches on ethnic Bajau tribe, the Bajau or also known as the *Sama*, is grouped as boat nomads or sea nomads---people who have a close affiliation with the sea and boating life, and tend to live a nomadic way of living. This group is also associated with several names/titles, including sea gypsies, *waju* and with 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/titles, the term Sama-Bajau is accepted as the name/title to include all ethnic tribal groups, not just those that have become synonymous with the sea living people, but also those majority ethnic groups living on the coast and on the land.

Geographically, the Bajau occupies several regions in Southeast Asia and becomes the indigenous people in three countries, namely 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 lives 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, Sabah and the Semporna district, located on the East Coast, Sabah. Apart from Kota Belud, the Bajau in the West Coast can also be found in Kudat Peninsular, Tuaran, Kota Kinabalu, Sepanggar, Putatan and Papar. In the East Coast, besides the town and the mainland of Semporna, the Bajau people also live on the islands such as Omodal 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 groups scattered and dominated the islands of Southeast Asia from ethno-linguistic point of view (Sather, 1997).

Demographically, about 15 years ago, a study conducted by Sather (1997) had estimated that the population of Bajau in the archipelago continent was between 750,000 to 900,000 people. Therefore, it can be suggested that nowadays the number of Bajau people on this archipelago has reached more than one million people.ⁱ According to Gusni (2005), the Bajau ethnic population in three countries, namely Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia is estimated to reach 860,000. In Malaysia alone, particularly in Sabah (including the Federal Territory of Labuan), the distribution of the Bajau population is estimated at 334,671¹ (Yearbook of Sabah Statistics, 2005:16). In total, the Bajau on the East Coast is ahead of little figures, estimated at 169, 349² people compared to the West Coast, which is estimated at 165, 322³ people (Yearbook of Sabah Statistics, 2005: 16-18).

Writings and studies of the Bajau origin can be traced since the 20th century---including writings and studies by researchers such as Warren, Sopher, Saleeby, Alliston, Nimmo and Sather. In the late 20th century to present (21st century), amongst the top researchers who have been actively written and published articles 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 maybe 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 record 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 Johore in the Malay Peninsular 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 Peninsular derived from the legendary stories such as that described by Cyrill 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.⁴ The legend of Bajau from Pulau Omadal stated that Bajau people was originally from Johor, was 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 was from Johore, as well as Najeeb Saleeby, which also suggested that before occupying Sulu, the Bajau came from Johore (Yap Beng Liang, 1993). Writings and research by Sopheras as well as demographic evidence from Earl and Tom Harrison also strengthen the theory which claims that the Bajau are from Johor (Gusni, 2005).

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 For details' reading about the legendary tales, please refer to the studies done by Yap Beng liang (1993), Sather (1997), and latest study by Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali (2006).

Meanwhile, the other opinion which claims that the Bajau people are from the southern Philippines maybe 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 mentioning 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 proceed 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 Johore are much stronger compared to Zamboanga.

A study on Land Bajau community conducted by Miller (2007) found that the West Coast Bajau language are more akin to the Indonesian Malay language compared to the Philippines and Borneo languages family. These findings reinforce the hypothesis that once said by Blust in 2005 which stated that Bajau people (proto-sama) are more likely came from Indonesia, which is located in the 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 authors feel that the latest linguistic findings can be addressed. Miller's findings also confirm 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 this West Coast Bajau people are still necessary to prove the validity. Until more of the same findings obtained, then only the matter can be finalized.

The Bajau community in the district of Kota Belud, Sabah in general

Kota Belud district was chosen as the research location because it suits the research context and issues that the authors are trying to explore in this research attempt. This is because the Bajau community in this area is still characterized by a traditional cultural back drop to the present, in addition to the population size of the Bajau community in the area that dominates the number of people along the West Coast Bajau in Sabah. Kota Belud district is located in the North West Coast of Sabah, about 77 km 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 District', in honour of the residents' skill in horse riding and because of the number of cows and buffaloes reared there.

Within area of approximately 1,386 square kilometers, Kota Belud district has a population of 75,568 inhabitants according to 2000 census. From the total, the Bajau is estimated at 26,054, the second highest after the Kadazan Dusun which figures 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 Iranun, Suluk, Ubian, Chinese and has become the location of migration among various ethnic and sub-ethnic groups from the Philippines and Indonesia.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Semiotic Theory

Semiotic derives from the Greek *semesion*, meaning sign, *semainon* which means signifier and *semainomenon* meaning signified or indication. Generally, semiotic is the study of signs or an epistemology about the existence or the actuality of sign in societal life. Many pioneers, researchers, practitioners and authors of semiotic such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, Charles Morris and Umberto Eco (Eco 1976; Leeds-Hurwitz 1993; PanutiSudjiman and Zoest, a. V 1996; Chandler 2002) have agreed on the simple definition. For understanding and clearer purpose, semiotic is account for everything that can be seen or be interpreted as a sign as postulated by Umberto Eco in his book entitled 'A Theory of Semiotics' who indicated that 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else' (1979; 7). According to Umberto Eco, that 'something else' is not necessarily exist or be exactly at the same time when the sign represents or replaces its position. Therefore, Umberto Eco often refers it as theory of the lie, or deception because it can be used for misleading or deceiving others (1976: 6-7).

Tracing the historical background and its advent, especially during the development of the classical semiotic, the philosophy pertaining to the significance of semiotic in the life of mankind has begun about more than two thousand years ago by the Greek philosophers. Later during the medieval, the meaning and the use of signs in depth have been discussed by the Stoici (Zeno) as well as among the philosophers and scholars. However, the term 'semiotic' only appeared at the end of 18th century when introduced and applied by a German philosopher, Lambert. Later in the 20th century, the thought and the use of signs on a systematic basis began to gain public attention and till then the field of semiotic has continued to become research topic and writings among scholars and academicians to date (PanutiSudjiman and Zoest, a. V 1996; Yarni Munaf, Erizal Ghani, Studs Rosa and Amris Nura 2001). In the development of the modern semiotic history, there are two pioneers from western countries who have made big contributions towards the respected field, namely Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a linguist from Switzerland and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), a philosopher from America.

Non-verbal Communication Perspective

Non-verbal communication is a field relating to various disciplines in social and pure sciences. Early studies on non-verbal communication started in two orientations. The first orientation started in the middle of 1950s by collaborative works of linguists, psychiatrists and anthropologists that were inspired by new development in informatics and cybernetic theories. Researchers of structural approach and context analysis were interested to study behavioural segmentations, forms of interactions and others. These early studies focused more on cultural context due to the influence of anthropological linguistic of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Among the key researchers of these studies were Ray Birdwhistell, who studied kinesics (Segerstrale & Molnar, 1997) through his monograph entitled "Introduction to Kinesics" in 1952, Druckman, Rozelle and Baxter (1982) and Edward Hall in *proxemics* (language of space) in 1959 and 1966 (Segerstrale & Molnar, 1997). The second orientation focuses on the natural side of non-verbal communication, and this field was mainly pioneered by Charles Darwin through his book entitled "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals" in 1872. Darwin concluded that all mammals show their emotions through facial expressions

(Segerstrale & Molnar, 1997). But now, the studies of non-verbal communication have expanded to various fields including linguistics, anthropology and social psychology. Literally, most communication scholars conclude that non-verbal communication is communication without words (Adler & Rodman 2003; De Vito, 2005; Tubbs & Moss 2006). Therefore, non-verbal communication refers to all wordless forms of communication, and this is similar to definitions given by scholars like Ronald Adler and George Rodman (2003:150) who have defined non-communication as “oral and non-oral messages expressed by other than linguistic means”. This shows that language messages like written texts that are not expressed verbally or based on linguistic, are not included as non-verbal communication but categorized as verbal communication especially non-vocalized communication because according to Stewart Tubbs and Sylvia Moss (2006), non-verbal communication only “conveys non-linguistics messages”. Like verbal communication, non-verbal communication includes both vocal (the use of mouth) and non-vocal communications. William Seiler and Melissa Beall also define non-verbal communication as “...all behaviours, attributes or objects (except words) that communicate messages that have social meaning” (2005:110). To conclude, non-verbal communication can take place through any senses, either through vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste. Non-verbal communication is categorized into several aspects. However, this article will only focus on the cultural artifact of an ethnic group, namely the *bangkai-bangkaian* in a death custom of the Bajau.

4. Findings and Discussion

Summary of the Contemporary Bajau’s Death Custom Structure

From the perspective of basis structure, the Bajau’s death custom is similar to the Malay’s death custom that is based on Islam. The handling of a body, namely the bathing, enshrouding, praying, sending, and burial, and the reciting of Yaa’sin or other verses in Al-Quran during the time when the decease was sick; before and after the burial is still practised and follows the basic ritual structure required in Islam. Apart from these basic requirements, the Bajau practices some traditional customs that are not required in Islam like the *ngeduang*, *mangan bangi*, *pesuk*, *mayang pinang*, *guris* ceremonies and others. Nevertheless, nowadays the Bajau’s death structure has undergone few changes due to pluralistic and complicated society. The changes can be seen in the tools and materials used and also some of the customs are no longer in practice or they are being simplified. All these are due to the reason that most of the traditional tools require time, energy and money, and with this postmodern period, the customs and traditional rituals are rather burdensome. In general, the contemporary Bajau’s death ritual structure shows unification between rituals and traditional as well as Islamic practices (Halina Sendera & Andreas Totu, 2014).

Mangan Bangi* and *bangkai-bangkaian

Mangan bangi in the Bajau’s culture is like a *kenduri* or feast for the decease among the Malay community. It refers to a mourning period held to commemorate and honour the decease. The Bajau holds *mangan bangi* (literally, it means eating on a day) for seven consecutive days after the burial ceremony ends and on every ten days until the 100th day, i.e. the 10th day, 20th day, 30th day, 40th day, 50th day, 60th day, 70th day, 80th day, 90th day and 100th day. *Mangan bangi* is also held on *temuan taun*, which is held after a year of the death and also on every death anniversary for the able families. There are two different customs influencing the day count in *mangan bangi*, namely *adat sama* (*sama* custom) and *adat abai* (*abai* custom). In *adat abai*, the first day is counted from the day of the confirmation of death, whereas in *adat sama* the days are counted

from the date of the burial ceremony⁵. Thus, there is a possibility that the 7th day feast in *adat abai* is actually held on the 6th day of *adat sama* or otherwise.

During the *mangan bangi* period, there are several important practices and rituals that need to be conducted, namely to care for the *bangkai-bangkaian*, *mesduwo turun*, *bejogo*, *ngeduang* and others. In addition, the recital of prayers and *tahlil* or recital of quranic verses during the *mangan bangi* period is a must as it is practised by the Malay community during the *kenduri arwah* or the feast for the decease (Abdul Rahman Ahmad Hanafiah, 2004). However, the Malays will hold the feast on the 3rd, 7th, 14th, 40th, 100th day and on every anniversary of the death (Syed Alwi bin Sheikh Al-hadi, 1960).

The *mangan bangi* ceremony can be categorized into small and big feasts. The small feast is called the *bejogo* (staying awake) ceremony in relation to the preparation and tending of the *bangkai-bangkaian* that will be held for seven days and seven nights. Still, on the 3rd, 7th, 10th and 20th day, the feast for the death will be held by inviting relatives and guests, and the number of people invited to the feast is normally greater than the number of people invited to the usual feast⁶. Also, the big feast will be conducted during *bangi pitu*, *bangi empatpu* and *bangi datus/atusan* periods (the 7th, 40th and 100th day of the death) and during those periods *ngeduang* (a ritual) will be held.

Generally, the family members will return home to prepare the *bangkai-bangkaian* and a feast and other needs⁷ on the same day after the burial ceremony completed as a preparation for the first night feast--the night is called the *mesduwo turun* (*kenduri turun* or *turun* feast) and the starting of *bejogo* (staying awake) ceremony, mainly for those practising *adat sama*. *Bangkai-bangkaian* refers to *peturian* or bed for the decease that is fully ready with bedding set (such as mattress, pillows, bed cover, blankets and others), the decease's clothing, a mirror and a few items belonging to the decease. The items will be arranged neatly on the 'head' (upper part) of the *bangkai-bangkaian*. Traditionally, the *bangkai-bangkaian* will be prepared by the decease's family for seven days from the burial day because the Bajau believes that the decease's spirit will return home to visit his or her family members. During that seven days of the feast and *bejogo* ceremony, the *bangkai-bangkaian* must be attended and watched carefully from *mangat* and ghosts known as *balan-balan*. According to Bajau's tradition, *mangat* and *balan-balan* will successfully 'get' the body of the decease with only a piece of thread of the *bangkai-bangkaian* cloth⁸. Therefore, Quranic verses and Yassin should be recited daily for seven days in order to protect the body as well as to ease the burden of the body in the afterlife. Customarily, the belongings of the decease will be given away to

⁵ This is due to the reason that during the death, mainly during hours after noon or *Zohor*, the decease will sometime be buried on the following day because of the time constraint in handling matters relating to the needs and rituals of death. Therefore, the date of the death is sometimes different from the date of the burial. For those following *adat abai*, the days counting is important. It should be counted from the date the decease passes away, and not from the date of the burial as it is practised in *adat sama*. Normally, the Bajau living in *kampong* or villages like in *Timbang Dayang* and *Sembirai* practises *adat abai*, whereas the Bajau living in *kampong* or villages in Kota Belud practises *adat sama*. The days counting, either in *adat abai* or *adat sama*, is also applied in deciding the starting date for *Ramadhan* (fasting month in Islam) and *Eid* celebration. Sometimes, the Bajau, who practises *adat abai*, will start fasting and celebrate *Eid* earlier than the *Ramadhan* and *Eid*'s official designated date as well as the Bajau who practises *adat sama*.

⁶ Based on an interview with Ustaz Tarmizi Abdul Rahman, the authors believe that this relates to the Malays' beliefs that are based on hadith of prophet.

⁷ The preparations provided are like the prayer mat, *Yassin* book, ablution's place, area for prayer and others.

⁸ According to the Bajau's tradition on death, it is believed that if the *balan-balan* has the opportunity to lick the *bangkai-bangkaian*, the *balan-balan* will snatch the decease's body from the grave (Saidatul Nornis, 2010).

closest relatives when the *bangkai-bangkaian* is dismantled during the final day⁹ (the 7th day), that is during dawn before the sunrise. The first night feast called *mesduwo turun* or *turun* or ‘descending’ feast (a manifestation of a body ‘descending’ to its resting place (grave), a *solat hajat* or an intent or wish prayer will be conducted especially for the decease’s wellness.



Image 46



Image 47



Image 48

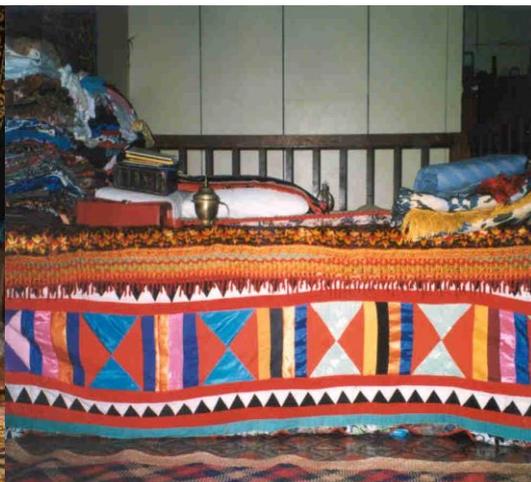


Image 49

Images 46 - 49: A few Samples of *Bangkai-bangkaian*

Besides conducting the *bejogo* ritual at home, the ‘staying awake’ practice on the grave is also practised by the Bajau community, especially by the *Datu*’ ethnic heritage. Traditionally, this practice is conducted by the decease’s family for 40 days as an honour and also to protect the body from evil entities. For the commoners, guarding (‘staying awake’ practice) the grave is mainly done for the first born child of the family,

⁹ The days’ counting is different according to the custom practised, namely the *adat sama* or the *adat abai*. In *adat abai*, the first day is counted from the date of the death, whereas in *adat sama*, the first day is counted from the date of the burial ceremony.

who passes away at birth or at infant age (this first born child is called *anak tindoro*). The purpose of the practice is to stop evil intention of some people who practise black magic from getting the body of the child. According to the Kota Belud village head, if a person is able to obtain *anak tindoro*, he or she is capable to make a person becomes invisible by slathering the person's body with the baby's saliva. The act can be done by tapping the grave while reciting specific verses, and it is believed that after the ritual finishes, the body of the baby will 'ascend' from the grave and will drool special saliva. With this supernatural power, anybody can perform evil acts like stealing, rape, killing and others. Due to this belief, the 'staying awake' or guarding practice is still performed until today, for at least seven days for commoners.

During that seven days of the *bejogo* ceremony, the family members and relatives will be busy to make preparation for the *bangipitu* (the 7th day) feast that will be completed with the main ritual, namely the *ngeduang*. Food like traditional essential *kuih-muih* or mini cakes and other types of food will be offered to guests. *Ngisikalas* activity that is filling glutinous rice into *kalas*¹⁰ (a type of leaf) and preparing dishes to fill in food such as *dunbegiang*¹¹ and *tembusa*¹² are among the important practices of *bejogo*.

The presence of *bangkai-bangkaian* in *bejogo* ceremony (for the duration of seven days after the death) relates to a myth, which tells that the spirit of the dead will return home, and this was confirmed by an observed informant, Puan Ambong Gayah¹³. According to her, the Bajau was at first did not believe that the dead will return home and linger around the *bangkai-bangkaian*. In order to confirm this, they had placed *dodok* (rice flour) on the *bangkai-bangkaian* that was covered with white cloth, and left it for a night. The following day the family members found footprints on the white cloth. In relation to this, the Bajau started to have the idea of the existence of supernatural beings, i.e. the spirit of the dead. This belief is manifested in the build and preparation of the *bangkai-bangkaian* as a symbol to welcome the spirit home and also as a symbol of honour and love to the dead. To help the dead to find a place to rest and not to wander around the house, the *bangkai-bangkaian* furnished with personal belongings of the dead is prepared in designated space in the house.

The *bangkai-bangkaian* concept or bed prepared at designated space for the spirit of the dead to come home during the feast is not only applied and found in the Bajau culture, but it is also practised in some ethnic groups in Sabah. Among the ethnic groups are the Iranun, who use the same term, *bangkai-bangkaian*, Bajau Semporna, who refer the bed as *pabangkai-bangkaian*, Bisaya, who refer the bed as *mayat-mayat* or *bangkai-bangkaian* and Idahan, who refer the bed as *terugan* (Halina Sandera, 2012; Saidatul Nornis, 2010). Apart from the ethnic groups in Sabah, the *bangkai-bangkaian* concept also exists in the death ceremony of the sea ethnic groups of Kabupaten coast in Riau Archipelago. One example of the sea ethnic groups is the Mantang---as reported by Moh Daud Kadir (1985). Based on the Mantang's belief, the spirit of the dead will return home during the feast and for that reason, they have placed a bed, furnished with the dead's clothing, for the dead at the middle of the house or in the middle of a *sampan/prahu* or boat (for those living on *sampan/prahu* or boat).

¹⁰*Ngisi kalas* is normally held on the third day of the feast. Elderly and younger women who are relatives and people of the village who come to the *bejogo* ceremony will gather to perform this routine.

¹¹*Dun begiang* is a type of leafy wild yam.

¹²*Tembusa* refers to a basket made of coconut leaf weaving.

¹³ An interview with Puan Ambong Gayah at her house in Kampung Timbang Dayang, Kota Belud on 4th March 2010.

According to an informant, Puan Mulai Mulud¹⁴, the *bangkai-bangkaian* is prepared in order to greet the return of the dead, and it is not only limited to seven days and nights of *bejogo*. It will be held every year, namely three days before the Eid celebration¹⁵ (the Bajau calls it as *songom pitu'* or *malam tujuh* or the 7th night in English). The *malam tujuh* is related to *malam lailaturqadar*, which refers to a magical night and is always awaited by people who believe that their living will be improved tremendously on that night that happen only once a year. It is also believed that the dead will visit the family members on that night if the ritual to welcome them is held. On that night the Bajau people will prepare a place or an area to welcome the spirits of their deceased family members, the past or the new deaths. The area does not have to have the form of *bangkai-bangkaian* like it is prepared in *bejogo* ceremony, but it is just enough to stretch a mat or mattress and to prepare a few necessities to welcome guests such as *penapa'* (tools to eat betel) and *sigup* or cigarettes, as well as candles to light up the area during the recital of prayers. The ritual is conducted as a gesture of remembrance and love so that the spirits of the dead will feel that they are still remembered, loved and taken care of by the family members. In addition, according to an informant, the spirits of the dead will always return to their homes although they have been dead for many years if the 7th night's feast, which is the ritual to welcome them, is still practised by their family members or their living descendants. The spirits of the dead are said to get angry, sulk, feel alienated or run away if the ritual is forgotten or not implemented.

According to the Bajau's traditional stories of the Bajau community in Kampung Liang Linau, as told by Madam Mulai Mulud and Madam Jubaidah Mulud,¹⁶ the spirit of the dead will linger around the house during the seven days of *bejogo*, as long as the *bangkai-bangkaian* is not dismantled. Therefore, during that seven days period, the house's door will not be closed so that the spirit of the dead can freely enter the house. On the seventh day when the *bangkai-bangkaian* has been dismantled, the spirit will move to the house's main door and will only look in the house to check the people in the house from outside. Day by day, the spirit will eventually move away from the main door and on the 44th day, the spirit will go to the lawn of the house and will not go back to the house again. After 100 days of the death, the spirit will 'disappear' into the winds and will only come back after a year during the *kenduri arwah* or the feast for the spirit, and will again 'disappear' after the end of the prayer's recitation. The spirit is believed to return again every year during the *malam tujuh* or the 7th day feast. The prayer's recitation is believed to help the spirit in the afterlife, namely the metaphysical world. For this reason, the Bajau practises the *ngeduang* ritual during the *kenduri arwah* so that the spirit will not go hungry and will continue survival in his or her new world.

To sum, the *bangkai-bangkaian* conceptualized as a symbol in semiotic is prepared to express the family's love and honour towards the dead, so that he or she will not feel alienated although he or she has passed away. This significant symbol manifests the Bajau worldview on their beliefs on the power and existence of supernatural being lingering still in their live until today. Figure 1 & 2 below illustrate the semiotic symbol of *bangkai-bangkaian* and the semiotic process irrespectively.

Figure 1: Semiotic Symbol of Bangkai-bangkaian

¹⁴An interview with Madam Mulai Mulud at her house in Kampung Liang Linau, Kota Belud on 18 March 2010.

¹⁵The date refers to the 27th day of a fasting month.

¹⁶An interview with two siblings, Madam Mulai Mulud and Madam Jubaidah Mulud in Kampung Liang Kinau on 18 March 2010.

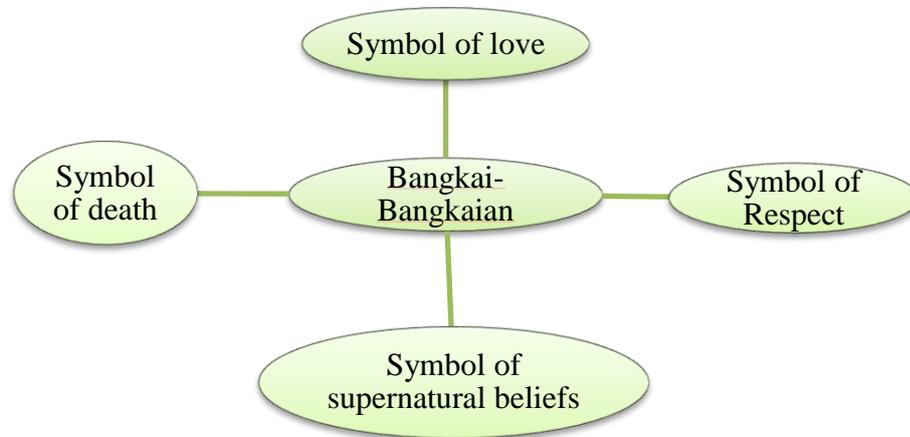
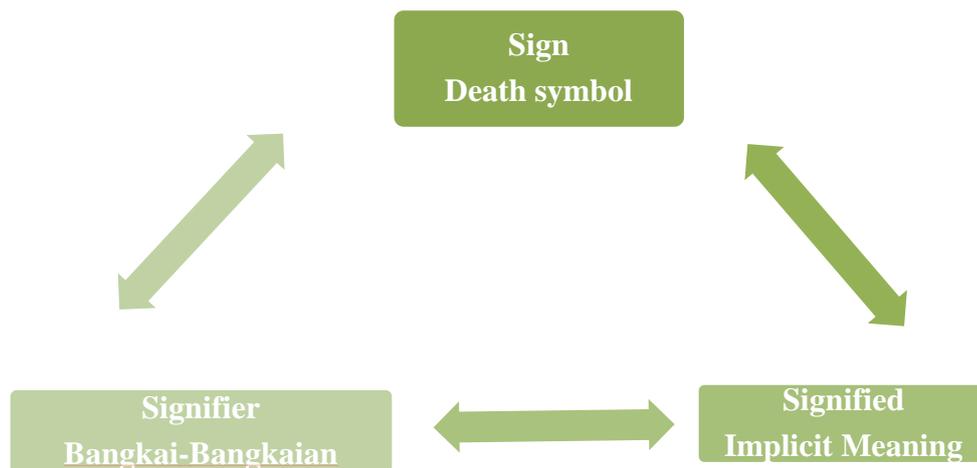


Figure 2: The Semiotic Process



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