

**Mag-igal and Igal-Jin: Dancing the Spirits of the  
Ancestors in the Rituals of Magduwata of the Bajau  
Kubang in Bumbum Island, Semporna, East Malaysia**

By:

**Mohd. Anis Md. Nor  
and  
Hanafi Hussin**

(Paper presented at the *24th ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology  
Symposium* held in Cluj, Romania, on 10-16 July 2006)

*24<sup>th</sup> ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology Symposium,  
Cluj, Romania, 10-16 Julai 2006*

**Mag-igal and Igal-Jin:  
Dancing the Spirits of the Ancestors in the rituals of Magduwata  
of the Bajau Kubang in Bumbum Island, Semporna, East  
Malaysia**

**Professor Dr. Mohd Anis Md Nor**  
Cultural Centre, University of Malaya

**Dr. Hanafi Hussin**  
Department of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya

## Abstract

*Mag-igal (dancing) and Igal-Jin (dancing spirit bearer) are the liminal performative components of Magduwata, a healing ritual ceremony of the Bajau Kubang people in Semporna, East Malaysia. This paper will focus on the liminality of Magduwata ceremony of the Bajau Kubang from Bumbum Islands in Semporna through trance dancing (Mag-igal and Igal-Jin) at the conclusion of the ancestral-derived healing ceremony. The Magduwata ritual healing represents a classic example of Turner's 'social drama' where unexplained sickness among family members is regarded as a breach in the physical and metaphysical relationship of the living and the ancestral spirits. Hence, crisis that emerges from this breach is moderated through the regressive action of the spirit bearers (Jin) who performs the Igal (dance) with the immediate family members dancing (Mag-igal) to reintegrate spiritual and physical balance. Performativity (where performance is floated freely) in Magduwata as ritual participants perform within the matrix of space and audience, liminalises the constructs of hierarchy within the social structure of the Bajau Kubang's family, altering time and space that is not part of the legal convention (something that is extra legal) that happens outside the familiar. It is both strange and estrange. Hence, dancing (Mag-igal) by participants and dancing-spirit-bearer (Igal-Jin) is both a 'social drama' in the Turnerian sense as well as a liminal event in the performative sense.*

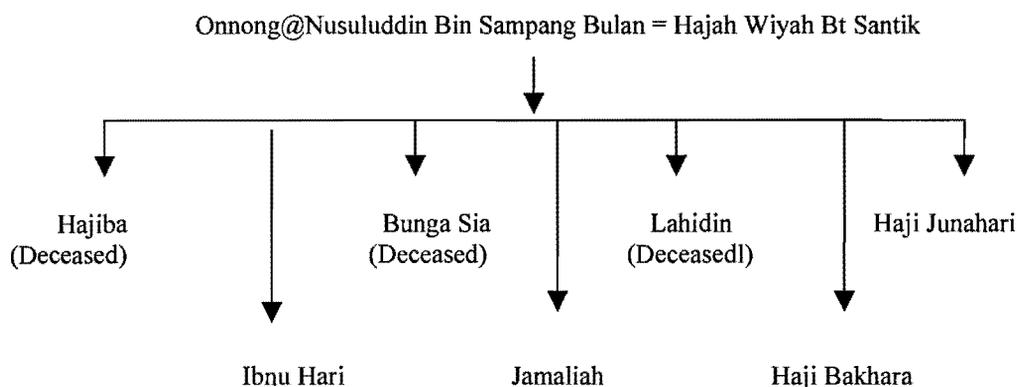
*This paper will be presented in two parts. The first part illustrates the narratives of ritual constructs while the second part discusses the ensemble of 'social drama' and its 'liminal' structure, which is metamorphosised through dancing or Mag-igal.*

## Introduction

This paper is based on a case study of the *Magduwata* ritual observed in the Bajau Kubang community in the village of Kabimbangan Tengah located on the southern tip of Bumbum Island within the district of Semporna in Sabah (North Borneo), Malaysia. Field research was conducted twice; the first visit was from the 17th to the 19th of September 2004 and a final observation was conducted from the 8th to the 9th January 2005. Permission to conduct this field research on a private ritual-healing ceremony was given by Haji Bakhara bin Onnong, head of the Onnong's household. The *Magduwata* healing ritual was conducted to placate spirits of ancestors that were assumed to have caused illness to the members of the

household, in particular, the illness that befell Haji Bakhara himself. Failures to hold annual new rice offering ceremonies of *Magpait Bahau* (offering of newly harvested hill rice) over two annual cycles were believed to have contributed to the ‘imbalance of spiritual energies’ in his household. In the past three year period, Haji Bakhara’s refusal to sponsor this event<sup>1</sup> has made it a revived rarity in his household. He decided to reconvene the old but familiar healing rituals of *Magduwata* after much deliberation on his part. The ritual observed in this paper was held in the house of his elder brother, Maharaja Ibnu Hari bin Onnong. Haji Bakhara is the sixth sibling of the Onnong family.

Family of Haji Bakhara Bin Onnong



**Source of Power: *Duwata* (ancestors), *Busong/Tula’* (curse), *Pait Bahau* (new rice)**

There are three prominent reasons, which necessitate *Magduwata* as a placatory event to appease ancestors’ spirit and to heal ‘imbalances’ that breaches social order and spiritual harmony. These are the ancestors (*Duwata* or *Ruwata*) whose curse against surviving descendents who had disobeyed or disregarded the rites of *Magduwata* rituals had caused illnesses, which may only be cured by offering newly harvested hill rice (*Pait Bahau*) as they solicit forgiveness to redress the breach in acknowledging the presence of their ancestral

lineage (*Katurunan*). Reconciliation with ancestral spirits is to be attained after a successful *Magduwata* healing ritual.

### ***Duwata***

Although the egalitarian Bajau Kubang professed Islam as their religion, their affinity to an eclectic indigenous belief systems and the monotheistic Islamic religion becomes tenuously intertwined when indigenous spirits are recognized within Islamic term of reference. God is recognized as *Tuhan* (a Malay term) or *Allah* (the Islamic god). However, *Omboh* (ancestor), which is a Sama or Tausug term, may also be called as *Arwah* (a Malay term for departed soul). *Ruwata* (spirits of the sky) and *Jin* (spirits in the guise of smoke) and *Syaitan* (a derivative of Islamic Satan in the Malay language) are malevolent or benevolent powers from the spiritual world, which may inter fear with lives of the living when offerings to placate and acknowledge their presence are breach. Hence, *Magduwata* becomes necessary to appease spirits of the ancestors. *Duwata* or *Ruwata* are generically referred to as spirits or souls of ancestors. Hence, the act of appeasing ancestors' spirits through ritual offerings, body cleansing, recitation of Islamic verses (*Doa*), music making (*Magtagunggu*) and trance dancing (*Mag-igal*) or dancing spirit bearer (*Igal-Jin*) is recognized as an act of obedience and filial piety to the ancestors (*Magduwata*). Appeasements through annual ritual offerings of newly harvested hill rice (*Magpaiti Bahau*) are referred to as *Magruwata Kok Taon* (to celebrate an auspicious moment of the ancestors' New Year according to the ancestors' calendar). This is done with the offering of newly harvested rice, *Magpaiti Bahau* which is processed into sweet-meals for the appeasement ceremony. Similarly, ritual healing ceremonies (*Magduwata* or *Magduwata Kabusongan*), rituals to prevent against ancestral curse (*Magbusong*) and exorcism rituals for grave sicknesses (*Bekelamat*) are indigenous systems of pre-Islamic times, which becomes necessary should any incurable illness amongst members of a family are deemed to have been caused by *Busong* or *Tula'* (cursed of the ancestors). In this particular situation, *Magduwata* may also be referred to as *Magjamu* (feeding of ancestors) while the act of asking for forgiveness from the ancestors for any wrong doing or to admit fault is known as *Magpataluwak*.

## ***Magpaii Bahau***

*Magpaii Bahau* refers to the offering of new rice to the ancestors' spirits (*Duwata* or *Ruwata*). Clifford Sather (1997: 304-308) remarked how this event, which he referred to as *Magpai Baha'u*, was celebrated by the Bajau Laut (Sea Gypsies) in the village of Kampung Bangau-Bangau in Semporna.

"*Magpai baha'u*, marking the return of the ancestors, opens with the fashioning of the *kulit mbo'*. At midday, the bin is filled with new rice. Next comes the nightly dancing of the jin, followed in the morning by the preparation of the new rice<sup>2</sup>, climaxing with the midday feasting of the ancestors.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the rite concludes with early morning bathing.<sup>4</sup> In addition to *magpai baha'u*, the mediums perform further public dances during the year, called *magigal jin*, meant to entertain the village ancestors and the numerous spirits believed to inhabit the surrounding region, and so preserve their continued goodwill. Such dancing is also thought to have a therapeutic virtue, as the spirit guests are said to bear off with them when they disperse the various afflictions and woes suffered by village members. Tandoh ([sic] an informant) insists that there is a marked improvement in village health following *magigal jin*. Garani ([sic] another informant) maintains that, by tradition, such dancing should be performed every lunar month, on the fourteenth or fifteenth night, during the full phase of the moon. This is also the time in which *magpai baha'u* is performed.<sup>5</sup> In practice, the dancing is held less regularly, or at least it was in 1964-5. Its time and planning are fixed by a meeting of mediums called by the *nakura' jin*."

The *Magpaii Bahau* ritual of the Bajau Kubang in Bumbum Island, replicates the same rituals observed by the Bajau Laut (Sea Gypsies) in Bangau-Bangau Village as described by Sather. The main offering is newly harvested hill rice, which is accorded with a privilege status as head of the offering tray, *kok dulang*. Aside from newly harvested dehusked hill rice, other offerings include coconuts, sugar canes and corns. All these are processed, cooked and offered within the three day period to the ancestors, which is commonly known as *Magjamu ni ka omboan* or *Magpataluwak ni ka omboan* (to feed offerings to the ancestral spirits).

## ***Langkapan (Ancestral Heirloom)***

Other than causing displeasure to ancestors' spirits for not renewing yearly offerings of newly harvested rice or acknowledging ancestral lineage (*Katurunan*), curses in the form of *Kabusongan* or *Katulahan* may also arise for the failure on looking after ancestral heirloom (*Langkapan*). Other than the required compliance to offer newly harvested hill padi or fulfilling the indigenous filial calendars, *Kabusongan* may also happened due to the lack of respect to *Langkapan*, which had been passed down from one generation to the other. These tangible cultural objects must be ritually blessed according to the indigenous ancestral calendar of *Magruwata Kok Taon*, which is usually observed during the Islamic month of *Rejab*, two months before the advent of the holy Islamic fasting month of *Ramadhan*.<sup>6</sup> The *Langkapan* are conduits of spiritual energies between the ancestral spirits and the world of the living.

*Kabusongan* are only diagnosable through spirit mediums (*Jin*).<sup>7</sup> As intermediaries, the spirit mediums become the vehicle of his or her spirit helper through whom the spirit communicates. Diagnosed *Kabusongan* requires ritual *Magduwata*, a feast of offerings as a healing agent. But it takes both the village mediums (*Jin*) and the village Muslim congregational leader (*Imam*) to conduct this ritual. The former deals with the ancestral spirits the latter with Islamic recitation of holy verses. These two individuals and their functionaries forged a synthesis of syncreticism in the world of the Bajau Kubang, the landed seafaring gypsies.

## **Rites of Ritual**

Magduwata ritual is conducted through three ritual rites; *Magpatanak* (the preparation of ritual offerings), *Amangan Pai Bahau* (rites of Magpai Bahau) and *Magtagunggu'* (ritual music) and *Mag-igal* (dancing). The preparation of ritual offerings, *Magpatanak*, which last between one to two days consists of the following:

- sun-drying of newly harvested hill padi and corns
- gathering of cane sugar, coconuts, tumeric, *kisul* leaves, perfumes and benzoin or incense (frankincense or myrrh)

- laying out *Langkapan* (ancestral heirloom) in the living quarters

The first day is reserved for the processing of the newly harvested unhusked hill padi. It is first sun dried before being removed from the drying area to the mortar and pestle by the female members of the family to be pounded and de-husked. The new rice (de-husked padi) are placed in the middle of the house (living area) and are allowed to ‘sleep’ overnight with other *Langkapan* (ancestral heirloom) if the illness is light or for two nights for the more serious ones. This process is called *Amagtuli Buas* and *Magtubos*. During *Amagtuli Buas*, the entire household sleeps in the living area while the sick patients sleep in the sacred space near the mound of sun-dried newly harvested hill padi.

The rituals for *Amangan Pai Bahau* (rites of *Magpaa Bahau*) are more elaborate. First it involves the cooking of new rice, *Paa Bahau*, from the mound of sun-dried padi left to ‘sleep’ overnight. This is called *Bungkar* (to awaken things left asleep for cooking processes). Waft of benzoin or incense (frankincense or myrrh) smoke falls over the ‘sleeping’ offerings.<sup>8</sup> The first of several coconuts left to ‘sleep’ with the mound of padi is taken to the kitchen to be processed into oil, which is would eventually be mixed with yellow rice, *Buwas Kuning*. The ‘sleeping’ new rice is divided into three piles. Two piles of rice are cooked with tumeric to produce yellow rice (*Buwas Kuning*). The third pile of rice is soaked in water and cooked into sweet meals (*Kuih Panyam* and *Durul*). The pile of corns is also taken into the kitchen to be fried in oil and the residue is mixed with cane sugar to become, *Poloh-Poloh*, which consist of burnt but sweet corn residue.

As the rice is being cooked, sick members are accompanied to the ancestral graves with some other members of the family. In the case of the family from Bumbum Island, they had to go on a two hour boat ride to the island of Omodal to visit the graves of their ancestors. Here they asked for forgiveness and blessings from the dead ancestors and conduct a ritual bath (*Amandi Kubur*) near the grave mound. While this is being done, sick members of the family pray for the return of good health and the expulsion of curses (*Katulahan* or *Kabusongan*).

Before they return to Bumbum Island, a family member enters the scared space to ask permission from the ancestor (*Omboh*) to raise the ceremonial flag (*Panji Ka'ambo'an*) on the flag pole by the side of the house. Raising and flying of the ceremonial flag marks the moment when ritual rites will soon take place in the home of the sick patient. Once the entourage returns from their visit to the ancestral graves, cooked offerings are placed in the middle of the living quarters. The cooked offerings consisting of yellow rice (*Buas Kuning*), Sweet rice cakes (*Durul*), rice sweet meals (*Panyam*) and sweet fried corn residue (*Poloh-Poloh*) are laid in a row of plates as it awaits the communal bathing of family members.

The entire family, young and old, sick and able bodied, are regrouped in the middle of the house as they awaits the head of the household, in this case, Haji Bakhara bin Onnong, to deliver a 'ritual advice' to all members of the family. His 'ritual advice' deals with the importance of upholding their '*Katurunan*' or ancestral lineage through the continued practice of *Magduwata* as a means of acknowledging ancestral spirits to expel curses in whatever form and disguise.

At the completion of the 'ritual advice', the entire family members partake in a communal bath on a jetty outside the house. This communal bath is also known as *Amandi Katurunan*, 'bathing of the ancestral lineage' or *Amandi Tolak Bala*,<sup>9</sup> 'bathing to avoid mishaps'. The bath is done by splashing water three times over members of the family, which is followed by ritual blessing by the village Imam, leader of an Islamic congregation, who does the *Magalambe* (waving yellow cloth over the family members).

At the conclusion of the 'communal' ritual bath, members of the family, guests and visitors are invited to sit around the ritual offerings for the recitation of Islamic hymns and *Doa* (recitation of prayers). The *doa* or recited prayer texts consist of several *surah* (chapter or verses) from the Quran (*al-Fatihah*, *al-Iklas*, *an-Nas*, *al-Baqarah*). As the prayer is being read out loud by the Imam or leader of the congregation, smoke from the burning incense or myrrh permeates within the living quarters. At the end of the recitative session, the eldest female member of the family pour some of the newly produced coconut oil on to the first pile of yellow rice called *Pito Botangan* (seven ceramic plates of offerings) before it is offered to

be consumed by the sick members of the family. Following this, another final recitative session as a dedication to the soul of the dead takes place. This session is referred to as *Doa Arwah* (prayers for the dead). It begins with the Imam drinking some water from the water container made out of coconut shell (*Baung*), which is followed by the recitation of verses (*al-Fatihah*, *al-Ikhlās* [3 times], *al-Falah*, *an-Nas*, *al-Fatihah*, *al-Baqarah*, and *Ayat Kursi*), which is followed by *Jikil* (Islamic *Zikir*), chanting and supplicating god's name. Two Imams does the recitation, one reciting the *Doa* (verses) the other responding to the last quatrain of the verses in melisma. At the end of this session, members of the family and invited guest are invited to consume the offerings of yellow rice (*Buas Kuning*), sweet cakes (*Durul*), sweet meals (*Kuih Panyam*) and residue of burnt sweet corn (*Poloh-Poloh*). The ritual consumption of offerings made from newly harvested rice or *Amangan Pahi Bahau* (eating new rice) completes the rites of *Magpahi Bahau*.

However, it is the final and last rites of the *Magduwata* ritual, which engages the crossing of worlds between the living and the spirits. Referred to as *Magtagunggu'* (playing of the *Tagunggu'* ensemble), it also involves dancing (*Mag-igal*), spontaneous or trance-induced. *Tagunggu'* ensemble is made up of a set of small kettle or pot gongs placed on a wooden rack, a double-headed brass snare drum called *Tambul* or *Tambol*, and two large hanging gongs called *Agung*. *Tagunggu'* ensemble are also handed down from one generation to the other and is considered to be one of the *Langkapan* tangible objects or ancestral heirloom, which must be well looked after and played by an expert. Violation against taboos in the playing and caring of the *Tagunggu'* ensemble may also bring ancestral curse leading to *Kabusongan* or *Katulahan*.

### ***Mag-igal* and *Igal-jin*: Dancing the Spirit of Ancestors**

Dancing (*Mag-igal*) cannot happen without *Magtagunggu'* or music making. Hence, the ritual musical repertoire of *Magtagunggu'* includes musical pieces (*Titik*) and dances (*Igal*) normally performed for non-ritual performance as well as specific ritual pieces and dance styles. Musical pieces such as *Titik Limbayan*, *Titik Lellang* and *Titik Tabawan* with respective dance styles identified by the pieces' name; *Igal Limbayan*, *Igal Lellang* and *Igal*

*Tabawa* are performed by family members and guest spontaneously to celebrate the occasion.

Only *Titik Limbayan* and *Titik Lellang*, which are accompanied by the dances of *Igal Limbayan* and *Igal Lellang*, are musical pieces designated for the Jin or spirit mediums. These two musical pieces are classified as tunes for the ancestors (*Titik Duwata*).<sup>10</sup> Other than these musical pieces, which are accompanied by dance, other pieces are also played to invite ancestral spirits to the realm of the living. These are *Titik Tagna* (introductory piece), *Titik Jampi* or *Titik Jaupi* (incantations for the ancestors), *Titik Duwata* (tunes for the ancestors) and *Titik Lakkas-Lakkas*<sup>11</sup> or *Titik Lubak-Lubak* (literally means to play fast and fast).

*Magi-igal* or dancing by participants and observers of the *Magduwata* ritual and the playing of the *Kulintangan* pot-gong ensemble (*Magtagunggu* ') are integral parts, which are virtuous and profound to the *Magduwata* ritual. It is the culmination of momentous moments in the intense rites of ritual, cathartic and salutary, the former to ill health, the latter to the spirits of the ancestors. Hence, individuals with the strongest inclination to fall into trance while dancing are encouraged to take the role of dancing spirit bearer (*Iga-jin*), the rest who dance along, threads liminal spaces as conduits for the merging of spirits of the ancestors and the living lineage. Jin, like humans, is gender specific. Thus, possession by male or female Jin is acknowledged through the playing of specific musical pieces (*Titik*). *Titik Lellang* is associated with male Jin while *Titik Limbayan* is recognized as possession by female *Jin*. Spirit mediums who dance the *Igal-jin* (dance of the spirit bearer) holds a handkerchief in his right hand and areca palm fronds in his left hand. In the Malay myth, palm fronds from the *Areca* plant has long been considered to be fodder for roaming spirits. It is quite possible the same holds true with the *Bajau Kubang*.

In this research, the younger brother of Haji Bakhara bin Onnong, Haji Jenari bin Onnong, displays tendencies of an emerging Jin (spirit bearer) as he dances with costumes from the ancestral heirloom. He is believed to be the bearer of ancestral spirits and the receiver of *Katurunan* (ancestral lineage). As the Jin falls into a trance, a member of the

family would place a *jimpau* (handkerchief) on his or her shoulder to ensure that the dancing (*Mag-igal*) becomes trance dance of the spirit bearer (*Igal-jin*). It is during the *Igal-jin* that ritual healing takes place. The *Jin* (spirit medium) in trance takes the position of the healer by rubbing or messaging sections of the anatomy of the sick person. The handkerchief (*Jimpau*) is also used to beat the patient as trance dancing intensifies to a rapid pace. When dancing becomes arduous, the spirit bearer collapsed on to the floor in a faint. He is soon revived by the shaman, who could also be the village Imam, to recover from his exhaustion.

In spite of the seemingly clear division of labor between dancing the *Mag-igal* and dancing the spirit bearer (*Igal-jin*), boundaries are often crossed over if someone who dances the *Mag-igal* has the callings to become spirit mediums for their ancestral spirits. They too may perform trance-dancing and becomes the *Jin* (spirit bearer).<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the trance-dancing (*Igal-jin*) and ritual healing, all members of the family continue to dance the *Mag-igal* for the rest of the afternoon as they await the sun to set. At this juncture, the dance becomes spontaneous social-dancing, often performed in a linear formation around the living quarters that was once a scared healing space. When *Magduwata* is about to end, a series of Islamic verses (*an-Nas*, *al-Ikhlās*, *al-Falah*, *al-Fatihah*, *al-Baqarah*) and a recitation of a *Doa* (prayer) is read to conclude the event, marking the end of a syncretic event of indigenous and Islamic rituals.

### **Liminal Performativity of *Mag-igal* and *Igal-jin* in *Magduwata*:**

One of the many aspects of Turner's liminal phenomena "tend to be collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, social-structural rhythms or with crisis in social processes whether these result from internal adjustments or external adaptations or remedial measure" (Turner, 1982). The ritual-healing processes of *Magduwata*, from the *Magpait Bahau*, *Magtagunggu*, *Mag-igal* and *Igal-jin* are collective calendrical remedial events to reintegrate internal and external social crisis through redressive actions. The breaching of social and indigenous taboo by ignoring the need to sustain ancestral lineage (*Katurunan*) or the up keeping of ancestral heirloom (*Langkapan*) has brought about curses (*Kabusongan* or

Liminal performativity of *Igal-jin* transcends social hierarchy when younger dancers or older members of the extended family takes the role of the spirit bearer as he or she dances with the handkerchief and Areca palm fronds to become the conduit and spirit-healers between the world of the living and the world of departed ancestors. Haji Jenari, the younger brother of Haji Bakhara bin Onnong, who is able to perform *Igal-jin* when and if his ancestral spirits takes over his dance, for a liminal moment becomes more important than what was dictated by his social hierarchy. Similarly, Inda' Aishah binti Haji Abagat, a female relative from the village of Tongkaloh who had spontaneously took the role of dancing the dance of the spirit bearer and drank half a pitcher of sea water before stepping out of her trance and séance was in a liminal state of performativity.

Liminal performativity in *Magduwata* enables the participants of *Mag-igal* and *Igal-jin* to perform within the matrix of space and audience (participants) freely, hitherto, liminalizing the constructs of hierarchy of the Bajau Kubang community. It not only altered time and space beyond legal or socio-cultural convention but made it acceptable outside the familiar. It is both strange and estrange. Dancing the *Mag-igal* by the participants and dancing the dance of the spirit bearer (*Igal-jin*) not only satisfy the need to reintegrate a crisis breached by non appeasement of ancestral spirits, the regressive action of *Magpaili Bahau* and *Magduwata* enables liminal events to be the instrument of reconciliation between the living and the deceased.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> One of the main reasons for his reluctance to continue with this ritual has to do with his opinion on religious tenets. Since ritual offering of *Magpaili Bahau* relates to the world of ancestors' spirits, he is in the opinion that rituals of this nature are blasphemous to his Islamic faith. Based on that opinion, he has deferred organizing *Magduwata* ritual to a point when his illness, which was being treated by modern medicine, became worst. He now feels that it has to do with ancestors' curse or *katulahan*, which is also known as *kabusongan* amongst the Bajau Kubang communities.

<sup>2</sup> "On the morning of the second day of *magpaili baha'u*, eight plates of cooked rice are set out on the floor of the *nakura' jin's* house, as a food offering to the souls of the village ancestors (*amakan sumangat kembo'-mbo'an*). The offerings also include drinking water and incense. The ancestors are then invoked by the mediums and invited to eat and drink the meal prepared for them. At the same time, they are asked not to punish their

---

descendants, who are honouring their memory, but, instead, preserve them from calamity. The ancestors are said to be visible to the medium at this time, and converse freely with them. As soon as the mediums indicate that the ancestors have finished eating, the *nakura' jin* bids the guests who have gathered to take their places, and all eat from the same plates. The mediums then join them" (Sather, 1997: 305).

<sup>3</sup> "The village mediums assemble at midday. An imam opens the ritual by chanting in Arabic (*jikil*). While the imam chants, the mediums go into trance (*patika*). The spirit-helpers come into each medium's head. If a spirit is dissatisfied with the imam's chanting, it will scream and if it is displeased with the offerings, it will cause the mediums to knock down the cones of rice, so that they will have to be formed again properly.' While in trance, each medium is believed to be the vehicle of his or her spirit-helper, through whom the spirit communicates. The medium enters into a dialogue with the spirits and ancestors conducted in spirit language (*ling saitan*). Each medium generally asks why there is so much sickness in the village, or why so many children have died during the year, and the spirits respond by listing grievances, and by making requests for special favours. At this juncture, the mediums invite questions from the spectators who have gathered. The mediums, as Garani expressed it, act in this exchange like interpreters or 'intermediaries' (*paganti*), passing questions and answers back and forth between this world and the spirit world. The villagers typically ask advice regarding important decisions they must make, request news of the dead, seek remedies for illness, or advice on problems affecting themselves or other members of their house group. The mediums translate the questions into the language of the spirits; the spirits then speak through the mediums, and the mediums translate the spirits' answers or advice back into ordinary language. The questioning generally lasts for some time, as a great many villagers typically gather to put questions to the spirits and ancestral souls. Finally, the spirits announce through the mediums their intention to take leave, and one by one the mediums return from trance. Later, the rice and cakes used to make the *botong* are divided by the *nakura' jin* between the mediums and the imam who performed the opening chant" (Sather, 1997: 306).

<sup>4</sup> "The final morning of the *magpai baha'u* is marked by a ritual bathing (*magtulak bala'*), similar to that performed during *bulan sappal*, conducted by the mediums and one, or possibly several, imam. Its purpose is similarly to drive away sickness and other misfortune. In *Sitangkai*, *magtulak bala'* is followed by a final celebration, called *magkanduri*, held on near by *Sikulan Island*. After the bathing, all who took part go directly to the island where an ancient fig tree (*numuk*) grows, believed to be a gathering place of local spirits. Ritual bathing concludes *magpai baha'u*."

<sup>5</sup> "The timing and organization of these events are planned in each local community by its mediums. The time of *magpai baha'u* is fixed, according to village *jin*, by the appearance of a constellation of stars above the north-eastern horizon of the sky, corresponding to the source of the north-east winds (*utall' lo'ok*), called the *pupu* (*Pleiades?*), shortly after sunset (*pallawa' allau*). Once these stars appear in position, a group of mediums is sent inland to buy newly harvested rice (*pai baha'u*, literally 'new unhusked rice') from agricultural communities. Not cultivating rice themselves, the

---

timing of the rite is thus determined by the harvest season of their neighbours. In Semporna in the 1960s, the medium generally traveled to Lihak-Lihak, although at times new rice was also obtained from mediums in Sitangkai, who are said to have made an annual pilgrimage to Tawitawi to purchase newly harvested rice from Sama farmers on the island. The rice obtained is shared out between the village mediums and is husked, using a wooden mortar and pestle, by the female members of each medium's household' (Sather, 1997: 304).

<sup>6</sup> Amongst the paraphernalia of ancestral heirloom commonly found in the households of the Bajau Kubang are;

- *Lai* (large ancestral ceramic plates)
- Ceramic plates of various sizes for sweetmeals, bowls that served as coasters or bowls used for rain seeking rituals.
- Drinking glasses
- *Kuha'* (a pair of large ladder)
- *Pamamaan* (betel leaf containers made from Ipil wood)
- *Buku Maulud* (book of Islamic hymns reciting praises for the holy Prophet)
- *Jimpau* (yellow cloth)
- *Ampit* (red cloth)
- *Lantaka'* (miniature canon)
- *Tepo* (pendanus mats)
- *Baung* (coconut shells, which are filled with water and are expected to shake during spirit trancing)
- Ancestral four poster beds
- A set *Kulintangan* pot-gongs with two *Agung* (hanging gongs) and *Tambul* or *Tambol* (brass snare drum)

<sup>7</sup> The word Jin is a derivative of *Jinn* in Arabic, a pre-Islamic concept of "genii", which has become confused or combined, with a number of various other more beliefs, current in various countries in which Islam prevails. The *Jinn* is held responsible for certain illnesses, which they cause by taking possession of people (Rouget, 1985: 279).

<sup>8</sup> This is done by the eldest sister to Haji Bakhara bin Onnong assisted by a female relative of the family.

<sup>9</sup> This bath is conducted by Imam Haji Mohd Darwis Barat Daya (maternal cousin of Haji Bakhara bin Onnong).

<sup>10</sup> *Titik Duwata* is further divided into two; *Titik Jampi* and a combination of *Titik Limbayan* and *Titik Lellang*.

<sup>11</sup> *Titik Lakas-Lakas* is similar to *Titik Tabawan* from Tabawan island and *Titik Lubak-Lubak* played amongst the Tausug (people of the sea).

<sup>12</sup> Inda' Aishah bt. Haji Abagat, a female relative from the village of Kampung Tongkaloh in Semporna spontaneously took the role of the dancing spirit bearer and

---

administered spiritual-healing when she fell into a trance. She even went to the extent of admonishing the musicians for not playing to the right tune when she was in trance. However, the most significant observation made on this event was her request to drink sea water at the height of her trance-dancing. It caused a slight commotion when her request was not eagerly granted for fear of dire consequences to her health. This was finally resolved when she drank almost half a pitcher of sea water before she fainted in exhaustion. Upon regaining herself, she told the sick patient to repair the dilapidated house, a request transmitted to her by the ancestor spirit who came in contact with her during her trance-dancing. This remark was seriously taken by the family members as a reminder to upkeep the ancestral lineage and heirloom, a causal reminder of cursed miseries or sickness from their ancestral spirits.

## Reference

- Bottignolo, Bruno. (1995) *Celebrations with the Sun. An Overview of Religious Phenomena Among the Bajaos*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Fernando, Sunetra. (2002) "Tagunggu Practice by the Bajau of Semporna, Sabah." *Tirai Panggung* 5:17-29.
- Rouget, Gilbert. (1985) *Music and Trance [translation of La musique et la transe]*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sather, Clifford. (1997) *The Bajau Laut: Adaptation, History, And Fate In a Maritime Fishing Society of South-Eastern Sabah*, New York; Kuala Lumpur; Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Hanafi Hussin. (2004) "Field Notes September 17-19, 2004." Research on Magduwata in Kampung Kabimbangan Tengah, Bum Bum Island, Semporna, Sabah.
- Hanafi Hussin. (2005) "Field Notes January 8-9, 2005." Research on Magduwata in Kampung Kabimbangan Tengah, Bumbum Island, Semporna, Sabah.
- Mohd Anis Md Nor. (2005) "Field Notes January 8-9, 2005." Research on Magduwata in Kampung Kabimbangan Tengah, Bumbum Island, Semporna, Sabah.
- Schechner, Richard. (2003) *Performance Theory*. (revised edition). London and New York: Routledge.
- Schechner, Richard. (2001) *Performance Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Turner, Victor. (1982) "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," in *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal.
- Turner, Victor. (1974) *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

**Notes:** This presentation is to be accompanied with thirty minutes of digital video recordings and five minutes of excerpts from the field research. Digital photos are also available for viewing.