

## BEBAYUH: FROM HEALING RITUAL TO TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCE

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### Abstract

This study deals with the *bebayuh* ritual performance which originated from animistic beliefs as a healing practice. This qualitative research using ethnographic studies focuses on the relationships between human behaviours and culture. The *bebayuh* ritual is analyzed from the perspective of the theory of cosmology which sees human beings entrenched in the world not only in terms of space and time but also within the physical and non-physical worlds. Man's relationship with the world would produce all forms of creativity and extraordinary ability to produce artistic works. These different art works, symbolize man's innate being, their cosmology and their beliefs. It is also closely related to the four cosmological perspectives of earth, air, fire and wind. The resultant art work is also believed to have its own soul. The theory of cosmology will help to cement the various time-space components and becomes an important aspect to understand the function of *bebayuh* as a curing ritual. The community of *bebayuh* practitioners believe that the physical world is influenced by the metaphysical world, especially where it concerned the existence of other worldly beings, the myths and spirits associated with their ancestors. They also believe that the places they inhabit are also shared with the presence of these other worldly, spiritual beings. Based on these beliefs, offerings are prepared and rituals are done in the *bebayuh* performance with the main aim of respecting and asking permission from these spiritual beings to help with the healing process, which in the *bebayuh* ritual can be categorized as *faith healing*, vis-à-vis ritual practices which are related to religious beliefs. The healing came about because of the belief in the intervening powers and abilities of these spiritual/other worldly beings. This study shows that this ritual still plays an important role in the lives of the Melanau people providing them with an alternative form of curing. It also shows how the *bebayuh* has been modified to now become a cultural heritage performance.

**Keywords:** *Bebayuh*, Ritual, Animism, Cosmology, Curing

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Bebayuh* began as a religious ritual practised by the Melanau community since its animistic times which started of as symbolic actions based on worships, sacrifices and taboos. These rituals came about out of man's desires to find relationships with the spiritual and metaphysical realms due to man's innate and natural inclinations towards religion and religiosity. Within this context, traditional performances are also ritual ceremonies often used for healing purposes and attempts to find connections with the metaphysical realm. It is also a medium to unite members of the community to a belief system through different procedures and actions conducted in a symbolic manner. These ritual performances are aimed for the general well being of the community of practitioners (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2009).

These ritual procedures are closely related to the existence and cosmology of human lives and its interconnectivities with the universe amalgamating within it the concepts of time and space within the real

and non-real worlds within which man inhabits. Man's relationship with the universe will result in unusual creative outputs closely related to the four cosmological aspects of earth, water, fire and air. The resulting art work symbolizes the communities' attitudes and aspirations towards the attitudes and beliefs in their cosmology and religion of the practitioners. According to the theory of cosmology, the art work so produced contains within it the concomitant soul and spirit (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2009: 40). Cosmologically speaking, all human beings in this world are formed from these four elements: earth (which can be cool, warm and dry), fire (which is hot and dry), air (which can be dry, cool, warm and humid) and water (which can be cold, hot and wet). As such the body and the soul would yield a total entity, which is human existence itself.

Since man's existence amalgamates both the physical and metaphysical cosmos, it is understandable that human existence would also include the presence of other worldly beings. It is believed that the existence of these other worldly beings would result in both positive and negative effects for the survival of human existence. The negative aspects can be seen when human beings are disturbed by these other worldly beings and they become physically ill or spiritually disturbed. Due to these consequences, human beings would perform rituals to cure these illnesses and to prevent the negative effects of being disturbed by these other worldly beings. By doing these rituals, the community believes that a positive aura would emerge to justify the continuity of man's existence. Consequently, beliefs in religion and mystical phenomena are metaphysical trajectories which can direct us towards transcendental truths. Both these aspects have motivated and inspired those who have worked towards understanding and explaining the physical world. Current scientific proofs have also used metaphysical and mystical beliefs as important aspects of the existing system.

It is these religious and mystical beliefs that have led to the emergence of the *bebayuh* ritual. The community of *bebayuh* practitioners believe that the physical world is influenced by the metaphysical world, especially where it concerned the existence of other worldly beings, the myths and spirits associated with their ancestors. They also believe that the places they inhabit are also shared with the presence of these other worldly, spiritual beings. Based on these beliefs, offerings are prepared and rituals are done in the *bebayuh* performance with the main aim of respecting and asking permission from these spiritual beings to help with the healing process, which in the *bebayuh* ritual can be categorized as *faith healing*, vis-à-vis ritual practices which are related to religious beliefs. The healing came about because of the belief in the intervening powers and abilities of these spiritual/other worldly beings.

The study of the *bebayuh* healing ritual and the attendant symbolic manifestations is based on a field research done in Kampung Telian, Mukah, Sarawak on 14.10.2014. The *bebayuh* ritual was done by the Seri Ritma Borneo Association led by the 54 year old Edmund Salman Bin Tuna, as the *bomoh*/healer who is of the Melanau ethnic group.

At one time, Mukah was under the tutelage of the Sultan of Brunei and was the world's foremost sago supplier in the 19th century. Basically it is a Melanau fishing village in Sarawak, made up of about 37 villages with a small number of the villages being concentrated around Mukah. The majority of the inhabitants are from the Melanau ethnic group, which is the fourth largest group in Sarawak after the Iban, Malays and the Bidayuh. Initially they did not call themselves the Melanau, which was only introduced when they were under the rule of Brunei. The Melanau, especially those who lived in the vicinity of Mukah, introduced themselves as *A-likou*, the river people which also means the Melanau ethnic group who still practised the old beliefs and animism. The *bebayuh* ritual is a healing ritual practised by the Melanau.

## 2. THE COSMIC SYMBOLS IN THE *BEBAYUH* HEALING RITUAL

*Bebayuh* is a ritual healing performance which requires the services of a *bomoh*/healer. According to Edmund Salman Bin Tuna (2014), a *bebayuh* healer, he acquired these healing skills ever since he was young. At one time, he followed his parents to look for food in the jungle. Whilst waiting for his parent who were looking for food, he played by himself in the jungle. When he went home, he fell sick and his parents took him to see a *bomoh*. According to the *bomoh*, his sickness was caused by spiritual beings who were keen to become his friend. It was from here that En. Salman acquired the knowledge of becoming a *bomoh* which was gifted to him by these spiritual beings who had become close to him. These experiences also made Edmund interested to get involved in the field of dance. It was from here that he began to use dance as one of the elements to be used in the *bebayuh* healing ritual.

In the traditional Malay and Nusantara contexts, the *bomoh* (*shaman*) functions as an intermediary, connecting the physical and metaphysical worlds. This happens because the *bomoh* has special powers due to his extra-ordinary friends—the spiritual beings who inhabit the metaphysical realm. The *bomoh* can communicate with these spiritual beings from the metaphysical world to help heal the sick person who had been disturbed by these spiritual beings.

## 2.1. The Ipok Gods of the Melanau

The world of the Melanau people are surrounded by forests and water (rivers and seas) which also form the source of their livelihood. The Melanau people are also known to be sea-farers, fishermen, and sago growers which have influenced the belief system and cosmology of the Melanau who abide by the animistic beliefs in their daily lives in which they think that every corner of this world is guarded by the spirit of god, called the *Ipok*. According to the Melanau community, it is the *Ipok* who provide peace, well being, fortune and all things that are generally good. The *Ipok* can also cause disaster, misfortune and diseases if they are not respected.

The Melanau community have identified the four *Ipok(s)* who represent the four symbols of cosmology: earth, fire, water and air which determines a balanced existence as follows:

- a. *Ipok Laut*, the sea *ipok* or, in the Melanau language, the *Ipok Alud*, who is considered as the *Raja Laut*, the Sea King, who represents the water symbol, with its cool and moist characteristics. The Melanau people have very close affinity with water due to their location of living near the sea or at river mouths.
- b. The *Ipok Balau*, regarded as the *Raja Hutan*, the Jungle King, is believed to be fierce and can be hot tempered, representing the hot and dry, fire symbol. The forest also represents the fire symbol, which provides light to the lives of the Melanau community, giving them their livelihood, from the resources found in the forest.
- c. The *Ipok Sarauang* who is the *Raja Langit*, the Sky King, is guardian of the sky, representing the air cosmology, with its hot, cool and moist traits. For the Melanau community, well-known as sea-farers, air/wind plays a very important role to aid them in their sea/river voyages.
- d. The *Ipok Iyang*, regarded as the *Raja Tanah*, the Earth King, represents the earth symbol with its cold and dry traits.

The Melanau people have used the spirits of nature to manifest the relationships between man and the cosmos. The strength of this relationship is based on the beliefs in the *Ipoks* (the spirit of God) who is taking care of the four corners of this world. The relationship and strengths of the cosmos must be well protected for the Melanau community believes human beings are basically weak creatures who are always need the *ipoks* to help them in their daily lives.

## 2.2. The Bebayuh Ritual

Based on the beliefs towards the *Ipok* as the manifestation of the strengths and power of the cosmos, the Melanau community's doing of the *bebayuh* ritual is exemplifies how man's relationship and communication with the *Ipok* for purposes of healing. In traditional medicine, it is believed that the sickness in man's body is caused by the imbalance of the body and the forces of cosmology. To cure this imbalance, the *bomoh/shaman* would call upon the spirits who are affiliated with the symbols of cosmology. The internal and external cosmologic forces would oppose the evil forces which are in the body of the sick person. For the Melanau community, doing the *bebayuh* ritual is one way of combating these forces. The aim of the *bebayuh* ritual is to find the causes of the disease and to determine the types of spirits, which are disturbing the sick man.

The *bebayuh* healing ritual takes place for seven consecutive nights, with the third night being the climax of the ritual. The first night is conducted by the shaman, alone in his own house. It would be a bargaining process between the *bomoh/shaman* and the spiritual beings about the preparations needed for the *bebayuh* healing ritual. The second night is to finalize the things which the spiritual beings have demanded from the *bomoh* and the rules to be followed during the course of the healing ritual, which is usually done in the house of the sick person, although it can also be done in the house of the *bomoh*, depending on the needs and demands from the spiritual beings. All requests and demands must be made known to the *bomoh* through a special procedure which would be conducted by the *bomoh* himself. The *bebayuh* ritual is done only at night for the Melanau community believes that the time dimension is different between the physical and spiritual worlds for night is day for the spiritual beings. Thus the *bebayuh* ritual is conducted at night, for it would be daytime for the world of the spirits, and it is believed they would be most active and alert to carry out their tasks.

It would also be during the second night that the spirits would demand the types of offerings to be prepared and the *seladai* dance which must be performed. The special offerings as demanded by the spiritual beings to be prepared for the third night of the *bebayuh* ritual, include the following:

- a. The *Mayang pinang*
- b. The *tebauan* leaves (*pucuk kentel*)
- c. The *isem pisai* (these are the dried *palas* leaves which have been woven and tied to look like the *mayang pinang*)

- d. The *Bunga melur*
- e. Incense
- f. The *Gendang genayang* (used only in healing for it acts as the scanner to scan the sick person)
- g. Candles
- h. Shards of glass which are wrapped in a piece of white cloth.

When all the offerings are prepared the *bomoh* would begin the *bebayuh* ritual by burning incense which had earlier been placed in its special container, the *dupa*. The container is then placed on a plate and covered with the *genayang* drum. The *bomoh* then took and started playing the *genayang* drum as he recited the manteras in the language of the spirits, who are the *bomoh's* own guardians or associates who would be helping in the healing ritual. The language used by the *bomoh* is only understood by him and not by the other members of the Melanau community. The *bomoh*, Edmund Salman Bin Tuna, (2014) would say the manteras asking the spiritual beings to descend and help to combat the evil spirits that are in the body of the sick person.

Manteras play a very important role in the *bebayuh* ritual for this is the communication code used specifically by the *bomoh* to understand and decipher the ideas behind the material artefacts in the ritual. Through these manteras, the *bebayuh* practising community would be able to better understand their society and justify the physical and spiritual lives, helping them to be informed about the sequence of happenings in their world and about their very existence. These processes would enlighten them about power, their fortune/*rezeki* (that which has been religiously allocated to them), about time, space, sins and graces, hell and heaven as well as life and death. Manteras are not just mere words and sentences or magical utterings for they form a symbolic means of mystical communication full of loaded meanings. The *bomoh* needs to learn all these manteras and special sayings for in them are embedded the names of the spiritual beings who would be summoned or possessed. If the *bomoh* cannot understand the names and presence of the spiritual beings then he is not fit to become a *bomoh* for he would need to summon them in the healing rituals. A person well versed in manteras is a very knowledgeable and learned person because he would know about the existence of things and other beings and he would be able to control and manipulate the essence and spirits of these beings.

This becomes very obvious when the *bebayuh bomoh* has become such a respected person because of his ability to cure diseases. The *bebayuh bomoh* is the intermediary between the sick person and the spiritual beings. He alone is able to provide the cure for the sick person who was being disturbed by these spiritual beings. The *bomoh's* expertise comes about from his ability to control these nether beings.

As he recited the manteras, the *bomoh* would lift and beat the *genayang* drum covering the now burning and smoke- emitting incense contained in a *dupa*. The beating of the *genayang* drum by the *bomoh* is accompanied by other musicians playing other musical instruments comprising of both membranous and percussion instruments *Tadak*, *Tabuan drums* and the *Kulintangan (Gelantangan)*, the *Beduk*, *Tetawiak (Gong)* and *Canang*. The *bomoh* used the same *genayang* drum to scan the sick person so as to diagnose his illness. This scanning process is achieved by placing a lighted candle opposite the face of the drum and with the *genayang* drum completely covering the head and face of the *bomoh*. The lighted candle serves to enhance the *bomoh's* sight for he would be traversing the metaphysical dimension as he scans the body of the sick person to determine which spiritual being is disturbing the sick person. When the scanning procedure was over, the *bomoh* would swallow the lighted candle to extinguish the light. He would then rub it over the head of the sick person. This was done so as to neutralize the cosmos of the sick person, especially the coldness (water) and the heat (fire). Light from the candle which contains the heat element contained in the *bomoh's* mouth would be extinguished due to the saliva and wetness of the mouth, both of which would represent the water element. Water extinguishing the heat of the fire, would restore the balance of the patient's personal cosmology.

The *bomoh* would also fan the sick person with the *mayang pinang* and the *tebawan* leaves so as to balance the sick person's cosmology, in the form of the wind element. Not long after this procedure, the sick person began to lose consciousness indicating that the spiritual beings were present and were ready to help find a cure for his sickness. Simultaneously, rose petals were scattered on the sick person. This formed the completion of the elements of cosmology, the flowers representing the earth element. It also symbolized that the spiritual beings have descended to earth to help find a cure for the sick person. According to the sick woman, Norfauzana (2014), she was completely oblivious of everything when she was being treated by the *bomoh*. Thus she did not feel any pain, nor was she injured when she danced and stepped on the shards of glass during the healing ritual. All of her actions as she was being treated were the demands made by the spiritual beings who were disturbing her physical being. All she felt was that she was floating somewhere in a different dimension. This taking over of the sick person's physical body occurred when the spiritual beings, the *Ipok*, entered the sick woman's body. A communication between the *bomoh* and the spirits inhabiting the

body of the sick person then occurred, to enable the *bomoh* to know about the causes and the cure for the sick person.

The climax of the healing ritual happened when the *bomoh* and the sick woman both stepped on the shards of glass, signifying too that the spiritual beings have taken over the bodies of both the *bomoh* and the sick woman. The presence of the spiritual beings were proven when the *bomoh* and the sick person were not injured even though they had been stepping on the shards of glass. Both had entered the subconscious realm because their physical bodies had been taken over by the spiritual beings. This would not have happened, if they were conscious and were in the normal, everyday realm. Stepping on the shards of glass also signalled the beginning of the *seladai* dance, performed by seven male and seven female dancers, all of who were not married. The *seladai* dance was performed to welcome the spiritual beings who have come to help in the healing ritual. The fourteen dancers though were not “disturbed” or inhabited by spiritual beings. As soon as the dancers entered the performance area, the *bomoh* took the *isem pisai* leaves and waved it around the dancers’ bodies to signify the connection between the physical bodies of the dancers and the metaphysical realm of the *bomoh*. Waving the *isem pisai* leaves was also a symbol of the wind cosmology, hence acknowledging and respecting the presence of the *Ipok Sarauang* (the wind god). This was followed with the *bomoh* swallowing the candle, the *Ipok Balau*, (the fire god), thus balancing the cosmology of the performance. After swallowing the candle, the *bomoh* then rubbed the *mayang pinang*, all over the body of the sick person. The *bomoh* took the *genayang* drum to covered the *dupa* which was placed on a plate, as he passed the *mayang pinang* to the sick person. The *bomoh* finally lifted the *genayang* drum together with the plate out of the performance area, accompanied by the dancers, signifying that the third night, the climax of the *bebaluh* ritual had ended.

The healing rituals from the fourth until the sixth nights formed the prohibitions which must be adhered to by the *bomoh* and the sick person as specified by the spiritual beings on the second night. Some of the taboos dealt with food, whereby the *bomoh* and the sick person were prevented from eating stingrays, sharks, raw nuts and eggs. If these taboos are not adhered to, it would jeopardise the healing process and might even nullify its effectiveness. The seventh and final night is considered to be the night of *putus ubat*, the termination of the healing process, which required the sick person to prepare offerings for the spiritual beings as payment for having successfully healed her sickness. The articles required to ritually conclude the healing process are:

- a. Gold.
- b. A small javelin (or any sharp object to represent the bones which are believed to be the favourite food of the spiritual beings)
- c. A live chicken.

The above are given by the sick person to the *bomoh* to conclude the healing ritual. It would be the *bomoh*’s responsibility to fulfil his obligations by making sure that the spiritual beings get their dues. Based on the *bebayuh* ritual, the physical world of man and the world of the performance formed one organic unity amalgamating within it the spirits of the cosmos which would unify all the other elements. The transformastions of the cosmological spirits to the physical and metaphysical realms with the human body have resulted in a ritual performance able to heal the sick. Through the *bebayuh* ritual, the cosmos of the universe and the cosmos of the performance become united. Man’s external body forms the external cosmos, whilst man’s internal, spiritual aspect forms the internal cosmos. In the lives of religious people a balanced internal cosmos is important for the well being of the external cosmos is very much dependent on the well being of the internal cosmos. The strength and well being of the internal cosmos in turn, is very much influenced by the external cosmos which would faithfully fulfil what needs to be done based on their religious beliefs, which in the case of the *bebayuh* practitioners rely on their animistic beliefs.

### 3. THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE *BEBAYUH* INTO A TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCE

Currently, the *bebayuh* ritual healing has lost its original function, becoming less important and almost ignored by the Melanau community which is undergoing aggressive transformation in their daily lives as they change their jobs, their economic sources, their beliefs and the places they live (where before they lived in long houses, they have now moved into modern, individual homes). One of the reasons for these changes is because of the spread of Islam and Christianity amongst the Melanau community. These two religions have changed the world views and beliefs of the formerly animistic Melanau people which have resulted in changes to their cosmology, tradition, beliefs, rituals and cultural practises. The *bebayuh* ritual based on the animistic paradigms and cosmology is in direct opposition with the Christian and Islamic religions. As such the *bebayuh* healing ritual is no longer significant in the lives of the Melanau community.

Modernization and especially education have also impacted the community giving birth to a new generation of Melanau who can think in a scientific manner based on logic and pragmatism which does not accept the *bebayuh* as a healing ritual for they have now veered towards modern medicine. The young generation are not interested to pursue *bebayuh* as a healing ritual whilst the older generation no longer have the ability to engage in these curing rituals because of their age and also their religious beliefs. The *bebayuh* ritual has now evolved to become a traditional cultural performance which has undergone several modifications and transformations to be showcased to tourists. Still all is not lost, because there still exists a small group of Melanau people who believe in animism and continue to believe in the efficacy of the *bebayuh* healing ritual. It is this small group who have defended the *bebayuh* ritual. They are supported by those who, although they no longer practise animism, continue to perpetuate the legacy of *bebayuh* as a healing ritual and made it relevant today, by indulging in this ritual as an alternative form of medical treatment.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Within the animistic realm, the *bebayuh* healing ritual re-enforces the Melanau community's belief in the role of the spiritual and metaphysical worlds and its impact and influence on the real, physical world which is guarded by their gods, the *ipok(s)* symbolizing the cosmological worlds, which embrace the earth, fire, water and air. All these must be well maintained and kept balanced so as to avoid arousing the wrath of the *ipok(s)* which could be manifested in destruction and diseases. Hence the need for the *bebayuh* ritual, which through the intermediary of the *bomoh* would enable communications between the physical and metaphysical worlds. No matter the modernization that has taken place, the *bebayuh* ritual can still maintain its importance as an alternative healing method and or it can transform itself and become a cultural, traditional performance.

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