RITUAL DIRGES (SABAK BEBUAH) OF IBAN COMMUNITY IN SEBAUH DISTRICT, BINTULU, SARAWAK.

Mangai Anak Tugau, Mohammad Maulana Magiman*, Franklin Ragai Kundat, Ahmad Nasir Mohd Yusoff, Alaxender Chelum

Faculty of Humanities, Management and Science, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Bintulu Campus Sarawak, Jalan Nyabau, Post Box 396, 97008 Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia. Corresponding Author: *mdmaulana@upm.edu.my

Abstract: Sabak Bebuah is one of the twenty types of poetry among the Iban community. This poetry is a form of passionate expression of grief that is sung by the Chanter (Tukang Sabak) in the event of mourning ceremony especially among the Iban Community who are practising the belief in animism. Sabak Bebuah has three main functions namely, to separate the spirit of the dead from the family and relatives who are still living, to ensure that the death is not the end of life and to guide the spirit of the dead to the world of death called Sebayan. The main focus of this article is to make a study on the rituals related to Sabak Bebuah by doing analysis to all the related symbols. Apart from that it is also to identify the elements in Sabak Bebuah which has become an identity to the Iban Community. The methods used in this research is qualitative method (ethnography) consisting of Field Research/Fieldwork, Participant Observation, Interview and Documents Research in the area of Sebauh District Consisting of Sebauh River, Pandan-Binyo River, Labang River and Tubau-Jelalong River. The data collected then being analysed based on interpretive, descriptive, induction and Grounded Theory and so as the belief and understanding of the community studied. The outcomes of this study show that the ritual of Sabak Bebuah is to give a peaceful life to the dead. Besides that the symbols in Sabak Bebuah also shows that every living will meet the death and to maintain the cycle of life require consensus in the community. The value of consent is not meant for individuals but it covers the whole of Iban community as it builds identification to Iban community.

Keywords: ritual, Sabak Bebuah, identity, Iban community

1. Introduction

Basically Sabak Bebuah started from two believes of the Iban community that is the circle of life and death and the believe to all nature, social and domains in supernaturals like the earth, winds, fire, sun and stars. According to Buda & Chuat (2009), the period of creating lyrics and the performance of Sabak Bebuah started since 1900 to 1994 from five main living areas of the Ibans in Sarawak, namely; Julau, Kapit, Undup, Saribas and Saratok.
The earliest lyrics of *Sabak Bebuah* compiled and edited by Rev. William Howell and was published in the Sarawak Museum Journal in 1911. Buda & Chuat (2009) also said *Sabak Bebuah* of Iban community is divided into two (2) categories, namely *Sabak Kenang* and *Sabak Lumbung*.

*Sabak Kenang* is consisting of *Sabak Bangkai, Sabak Sedan, Sabak Ngerais* and *Sabak Rempuh* for the area of Batang Rajang and *Sabak Sebana* for Saribas area. *Sabak Pana* is presented during the arrival of a group of community from the cemetery after the burial process. *Sabak Ulit* and *Sabak Tina* is presented during the *Ngetas Ulit* ceremony (the end of mourning period). The second category is *Sabak Lumbung*, presented by the chanter without the presence of the decease. This cultural legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of the group or society that are inherited from past generations, preserved in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations (Magiman et al., 2020).

In this research, the researcher has made an analysis on several aspects of *Sabak Bebuah* in Sarawak generally and particularly in Sebauh District. Apart from looking at the ritual and symbols in *Sabak Bebuah*, the researcher is also looking at the conceptual and theoretical aspects related to animism and syncritism that make *Sabak Bebuah* becomes an identity of the Iban community. The existence of symbols based on the understanding of the previous generations who have been practised it by their imagination, emotional and intellectual experience and embodied through the psychological and sociological value of human growth (Magiman & Yatim, 2012).

**Interview Session with The Chanter (Mdm Santa Anak Banta)**

The Iban community believed that the lyric in the ritual of *Sabak Bebuah* is a guidance of the spirit to the Land of Dead called Sebayan. Among the Iban community, the death is an exchange of gift between the living community and their ancestors. Normally, *Sabak Bebuah* is created by the women community who are imaginative, and fluent in presenting the lyrics of *Sabak Bebuah*. This mean
that they have the ability to pronounce and say out their ideas in sequence during the presentation of the *Sabak Bebuah*. The role as the chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) normally played by the women community but according to Sultive (2012), there was a male chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) from Sarieki region who is able to guide the spirit of the dead as well. Normally women chanters (*Tukang Sabak*) are more tenderer and having more feeling of empathy than man. As such, most chanters are women.

2. Objectives

The general objectives of this research is to study on symbolism of the ritual *Sabak Bebuah* in Iban community in Sebauh Distirct, Sarawak. It is hope that this research will achieve its specific objectives as follows:-

i. To study the characteristics and the process of *Sabak Bebuah*

ii. To analyse symbols in *Sabak Bebuah*

iii. To identify elements of symbols in *Sabak Bebuah* which becomes the identity to Iban community

3. Problem Statement

*Sabak Bebuah* is one of the Folk Poetry among the Iban community which is presented during the burial ceremony for those who are still believing in animism (*Pengarap Lama*) and deeply believed in God (*Petara*). Turner (1969), God (*Petara*) is worshiped and praised through a few occasions like *miring* (offering to God) or *bedara* (offering of sacrifice), *sampi* (prayer), *pengap* (practice of uttering God’s name out of devotion to Him and His ownness), *timang* (invocation) during the religious occasion meant to deliver their wishes. According to Turner too, the Iban community believed in *singalang burung* (God of Bird), *Simpulang Gana* (God of Paddy and crops) and *Puntang Raja/Petara* (God). Besides that God (*Petara*) and ghost (evil spirits) commonly introduce through narrative stories like the methos on *Seramugah* (God Of Land), *Segundi* (God of Water) and *Segundit* (Creator of Sky). According to Buda & Chuat (2009) the Iban community belief in good and bad luck when they hear the smythics bird singing like *Ketupung* (Rufous Piculet) *Kikih* or *Embuas* (Lacedo Pulchella Horsefield), *Beraagai* (Harpacters Duvauceli Temminck), *Papan, Senabung* (Diard’s Trogon) *Pengkas* or *Kutuk* (Maroon Woodpecker Blythipicus Rubiginosus Swainson) and *Nendak* (Copsychus Malabaricus Scopoli). This belief is related to the burial process while they are going or at the cemetery itself. They firmly believe that every single disaster happened is the result of human-made wrongdoings as a human being. This is because, in their belief, this world consists of humans and supernatural creatures. Besides, they also believe the existence of spirits, ghosts, and others, and it has been associated with their daily lives (Magiman et al., 2020).
It is therefore, the Iban community are strongly believed in animism are still practising the *Sabak Bebuah* in every burial ceremony. The problem statements of this research includes identifying the symbolism in *Sabak Bebuah*. Among the symbols are the setting up of *Sapat* (Fig.1) from *Pua Kumbu*, the preparation of *piring*, sharpening stone and knife. *Wak* (Fig.2) is also prepared for the charter (*Tukang Sabak*) while presenting the *Sabak*. According to (Magiman, et al., 2020), the understanding and belief towards symbols is created through imaginations, emotional experiences and the psychological and sociological that goes in line with the mental development of human being (Nwabah et al., 2020).

The second aspect of this research is the ritual and the process of *Sabak Bebuah*. *Sabak Bebuah* can only be presented by the chanters (*Tukang Sabak*) because they have the exceptional knowledge and skills to guide the spirits of the decease to the World Of Dead (*Sebayan*). (Magiman & Yatim, 2012; Harrison, Egunsola & Oguntende, 2020; Nabila & Mohaffyza, 2020). Ritual are refer to the form of ceremonial offerings performed by individuals for the purpose of invoking supernatural power. Usually it will contain elements of presentation. In this ritual there have four levels in the process of *Sabak Bebuah*, namely, Introductions, Boundary between real world and World of Dead and reaching the World of Dead (*Sebayan*). Among the remarkable places upon reaching the World of Dead are Sungai Danau Alai, Batang Nibung Berayah, Batu Tekup Bedaup, Pintu Tanah and Menua Raja Sempandai. Mean while, when reaching the Word of The Dead, it includes Menua Akik’ Ungkuk and Eni’ Andan and Pintu Langit.

The third focused aspect of this research are the elements of symbols in the *Sabak Bebuah*. The first element is the usage of poetry language to form the lyrics in *Sabak Bebuah*. The language used is in form of poetry and symbolic. Below is the example:

“Naka’ pengelembau enggai meh aku, aka’tuai, ngesaika selambai telingkam dabung geman aku, Aya’ lantang Bujang Ganggam” (Sultive, 2012).

The other elements of symbols in *Sabak Bebuah* are the usage of *Pua Kumbu*, preparation of *Piring*, knife, sharpening store and tying of both feet of the decease using the red thread together with the lime throne. *Sabak Bebuah* is having several symbols and elements to be followed and it is therefore this research is focusing on the symbolism in *Sabak Bebuah*.

4. Literature Review

The Iban community is the largest ethnic group in Sarawak. The Sarawak population census 2010 show that the total number of the Iban in Sarawak is approximaley 1,000,000 people, about 40% of the total population in the state of Sarawak. The Iban is the fourth largest ethnic in Malaysia after the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The dwelling place of the Iban community is distributed all over the
31 districts in Sarawak, 6 districts in Johore, West Kalimantan, Tawau and Brunei. Despite the increase number towards urban migration, the majority of the Iban still live in longhouses settlements along the main rivers and smaller streams of the interior and subcoastal districts.

Viewing at their belief, the Iban community are still upholding to their traditional animism belief which they inherited from one generation to another generation (Umbat et al., 2002). Before the coming of Christianity, the Iban do not have any religions as they are seen practising their pagan belief and strongly believed their lifestyle are closely related to the cosmology. As said by Durin (2014), the Iban World incorporates both humans, gods and spirits in a relatively seamless fashion and different aspects of this world are perceived through changing levels of consciousness. Kedit (1980), majority of the Iban community had converted to Christianity over the past decades and they practice their traditional customs, ceremonies, oral traditions and functional rituals in the longhouse socio cultural (Edmelyn et al., 2020). The belief of animism is still strongly embedded in Iban’s lifestyle.

Numerous of past researches on animism, ritual, symbol, identity and syncretism by both foreign and local researchers are being discussed. Freeman (1962), there are similarities between community of Mojukuto (Japanese) in his book entitle The Religion of Java and the Iban community based on the symbols found in their animism belief. Turner (1967), the ritual process among the Ndembu in middle Africa came from their confidence in religion and belief. This is closely related to the ritual practices of the Iban community like, Sabak Bebuah, Gawai Antu, Pelian, and the miring process. According to Jensen (1974), there are common elements in the belief of Indonesian Dayak and the Iban community in Sarawak. Both the communities are living in similar surroundings and environments believing in animism and strongly belief in God/Petara. Both communities believed in natural and supernatural which brings the influence to the do’s and don’ts among the community. That is why in their culture the role of ritual is very important because ritual is a ritual performed to depict the natural state of supernatural beings or supernatural powers (Magiman et al., 2018). In conveying the wish, rituals will be performed as offerings to these supernatural beings.

Ritual is tool of transformation in a community and every ritual performance will brings symbolic elements (Magiman, Yatim, 2012). Every performance done is closely following the guides or regulations agreed by the said community to ensure its effectiveness. This findings is similar to Turner (1967) which said that ritual include the transition of life like, birth, marriage and burial. Ritual is repetitive performance following the procedures agreed by the community. Magiman et al (2012), the term ritualization is the most effective culture in ritual performance. It will help to elaborate traditional issues like, belief, legitimating and power. Symbol
is based on understandings or belief of ancestors made through imagination, emotional experiences and intellectual which also include the psychology and sociology in mental development of human being (Magiman & Yasin., 2012). This finding being supported by Osman (1989) that symbols are created and practice in the daily life of a community. For instance, Sabak Beluahan is a ritual in Iban community to bring the spirit to the world of death.

Tugang (2014), the Iban community believe in both animism and Christianity. The traditional belief of the Iban include the believe in natural and supernatural, consisting of God/Petara, the good and evil spirits of their ancestors. The elements in animism has driven the believe in all objects that are created by God/Petara are having its own power and spirits. It is therefore, rituals carried out is meant to ask for good, apology, permission and happiness to maintain the well being among the humans and nature. Kedit (1989), the Iban community believe that the world is a place where every object is having its own spirits. There are relationships between humans spirit and God (Petara) that brings effects to one another. It is therefore there are limitation on cultural and social values. It is also believed that God (Petara) is having its functions and power. There are two most important Gods in the Iban belief, namely Simpulang Gana (God for paddy planting and soil fertility) and Singalang Burung (God for war and welfare). The spirits play the role as a media of communication between the living humans and God through dreams (Nwabah et al., 2020). The creation of creative arts like wearing of Pua Kumbu, the oral poetry like timang, pantun, ensera and sabak. These are the main practices by the Iban community who are still believing in animism.

Sultive (1989), historical perspective, life is a result of holistic approach in life. It is the effect of interest in knowing the nature, social and metasocial environment. There are similarities in Classic Greece and Iban, whereby both communities are showing their interest in natural environment and the changing process in the community. The Iban believed that nothing will happen without its own reasons. It is therefore, the Iban community is always being sensitive to every pats of this world, inclusive of all living and non-living things. The Iban community believed that the dead will leave this world crossing Batang Titi Rawan (The Bridge of Anxiety) to reach Sebayan (The World of Death). The dead will go through interesting places and change into spirit and dew before it becomes a new human being. This historical aspect being dramatize through Gawai Antu (Festival of Spirit). The peak of this festival is to eliminate all hindrances between this world and the world of Dead.

According to Umbar (2015), the Iban community believe that the dead will continue life in Sebayan (World of Dead). This statement was comprehensively supported by Clifford Sather on the death of Saribas Iban in his book entitle Journey Of The Soul (1999). According to Sather, the spirit of the dead will have
to cross the Bridge of Anxiety, meeting wild and fierce animals like snakes and crocodiles. The journey to The World of Dead (Sebayan) is consisting of various stages before the spirit reaches a comfortable, quite and holy place called “Mandai Jenoh”. According to Taib (1985), ritual is a procedure in an occasion or holy and sacred deeds by a group of religious followers who have a common belief. It is symbolised with elements and components like time, place, utilities and community practicing the said occasion. This statements is having similarities to the Sabak Bebuah among the Iban community, presented during the burial ceremony, in the long house (staying place), require appliances like Pua Kumbu, knife and presented by chanter (Tukang Sabak). Iman Suprayogo (2001), was also having a common elements on ritual as said by Taib (1985).

Effendy (2006), the ritual for each occasion is meant to have better livelihood from whatever efforts done in life. In ritual life like birth, marriage and burial occasion, all are done for the prosperity, peacefulness and good health of the family. The Iban community is having their own ritual occasion accordingly to the said events. Like wise the Sabak Bebuah is practised by the Iban community who are upholding the belief in animism in their burial occasion. The animism belief by the Iban community is very much related to the living and non living things such as the animals, birds, insects, snakes, trees, mountains and rivers are closely related to the spirit world. Is is therefore, the movement of all living things related to their spirits are always being observed as a sign, warning and identification in their daily life. Similarly to Sabak Bebuah, it is the only means to ensure the spirit of the dead will reach the World of Dead called Sebayan.

5. Methodology

In the process of this research, researcher has been applying the Ethnography method and Qualitative Approach. The four approaches are Field Research / Fieldwork, Participant Observation, Interview and Library Research. The four approaches are used in the whole of Sebauh District to gather informations from all informers such as Tukang Sabak (Chanters), Community Heads and those practising and believing in Sabak Bebuah. The gathered informations then analysed by using interpretive, descriptive, induction and Grounded Theory base on the understanding and believe of the Iban community. The process of data collection also includes datas from the Manang (Sharman) as the Manang (Sharman) plays an important roles in guiding the spirit of the decease to the World of Dead. The main role played by the Manang (Sharman) is the separation of spirit between the decease and living community. This is meant to avoid any harmful action taken by the spirit of the deceases which may caused illness and bad luck. This research started since January 2018 and covers the whole area of Sebauh District. The Conceptual and Theoritical Framework used is Model Simbol Ketuhanan (MSK)

6. Findings

Through the process of *Sabak Bebuah*, the spirit of the decease is being guided by the chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) in four stages until it reaches the last stage called *Sebayan*. The first stage is called *Mejam/Nangam* (bath and dressing the decease), stage two is *Persiapan Sabak* (to get ready the presentation of *Sabak*), stage three is to present the *Sabak* by the chanter and stage four is reaching the world of *Sebayan / World Of Dead*. In the first stage the decease will be bathed and dressed in the best attire when he or she is still alive. The decease will be equipped with watch, ring and other jewelleries of moderate price. The decease will be laid at the gallery (*Ruai*) on to the mattress, mat (*Tikai Bemban*) and pillow. The process of preparing *Baya’* (Fig.3) (daily needed appliances such as knife, plates, bowl and clothing) in the next world is done. *Pua Kumbu* (weaved blanket) are hanged around the deceased which is called *Baya’ Pandang*.

The second stage is to set up the *Sapat* where the chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) will be seated during the presentation of *Sabak Bebuah*. The *Sapat* (Fig.5) is set up with four posts (square form) to protect the chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) and the decease from being interrupted by the spirit of ancestors (*Antu Sebayan*). Normally the best and eldest chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) will be chosen to avoid any disaster or mishap to the chanter. The *Sabak Bebuah* ceremony will begins at 9:00pm until 5:30am.

The third stage is the performance of *Sabak Bebuah* (Fig.4). The chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) will describe on the life of the decease by mentioning about the post held, occupation and contributions to the community during his/her life time. Later the chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) will persuade the spirit of the decease to leave the family members, friends and the living community. The whole journey to *Sebayan (World Of Dead)*, the spirit of the decease will pass through *Batang Titi Rawan* (*Bridge Of Anxiety*) and facing lots of other challenges. The journey to *Sebayan (World Of Dead)* also includes another challenge called *Pintu Tanah* (*Door Of Earth*). There the spirit of the decease will meet and asking permission from *Raja Belut* (*King Of Worm*) to enter the area of *World Dead*.

Fourth level is the arrival on the *World Of Dead* called *Sebayan*. The spirit of the decease will meet members of the family, friends and relatives who had left this world for a long period of time. The arrival of the spirit is very much welcome and given the best service by the spirit of the ancestors so that the spirit of the decease will not return to the living world. The spirit of the decease will find it is very comfortable to start a new life in *Sebayan (World Of Dead)*. Shaman plays the role to separate the spirit of the decease from the family members and relatives who are still living. The separation process of the spirit is done by the *Manang (Sharman)*,
called *Pelian*. The *Pelian* is called *Beserara Bungai* which will be done three days after the burial process, meant to lead the spirit to the *World Of Dead*. Without the *Manang* (*Sharman*) the spirit of the decease might not know that he/she is leaving this world and may cause harms to those who are still living.

In the process of *Sabak Bebuah* there are symbols that have its own meaning and functions by itself. The setting up of *Sapat*, the usage of *Pua Kumbu* around the decease is also meant, not to allow the decease to be step over by both cats and dogs. If that happens, the decease is believed to raise and brings disturbances to the living community. The *Pua Kumbu* is used to wall up the *Sapat* because it has been created and used since the ancient time. The *Pua Kumbu* is also used as *Baya’ Pandang* which is hanged around the decease so that the spirit of ancestors could easily recognise the decease. *Piring (turan tujuh)* is also prepared and put below the feet of the decease as an offer to the spirit of ancestors. *Baya’* (Fig.3) consisting of knife, cooking utensils, clothing and working equipments are also prepared. *Baya’* will be brought to the cemetery and put around the area the decease is buried. If *Baya’* are not given, the spirit of the decease will come back to the original family to ask for it.

Other symbols prepared are to put the rice grain on the chest of the decease so that the spirit of ancestor will easily recognise the decease. The arrival of the decease spirit is very warmly welcome by the spirit of ancestor. The wet rice grain will be distributed to every door in the long house to enable the borrowing of equipments or appliances for the purpose of the burial ceremony or otherwise no borrowing of any equipments or appliances from neighbours is allowed. The chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) will be given will be given a chicken, jar, knife and cloth worn around the body. A chicken is meant for the chanter (*Tukang Sabak*) to fly back to this world after sending the spirit of the decease to the *World Of Dead* called *Sebayan*. All the above symbols are to be closely followed to in order that the guidance of the decease spirit can be done properly by the *Tukang Sabak* (Chanter). Failure of doing so may hinder the process of guiding the spirit and may cause harm to the living community.
Fig. 1 The *Piring*, Knife and Jar (Ready before *Sabak* started)

Fig. 2 *Sabak Bebuah* in progress (Chanter using *Wa’*)
Fig. 3 The Baya’ (Daily appliances for the decease)
Fig. 4 *Sabak Bebuah* in process by the chanter
7. Discussion

Sabak Bebuah is still practise by the Iban community who are believing in animism. It is a process to guide the spirit of the decease to the World Of Dead called Sebayan. All symbols in the Sabak Bebuah are to be closely followed so that the process of guiding the spirit of the decease do not face any interference and bring the unwanted implications towards the family of the decease and the whole of living community. It is therefore important to have a proper process to bring down the knowledge in Sabak to younger generations systematically. In the effort to enhance and to spread the knowledge of Sabak Bebuah, Tun Jugah Foundations organised a workshop in Kapit on 24th July 1999. The workshop was attended by a number of talented Tukang Sabak (chanters) such as Ukok anak Ribut, Ngana anak Akum, Siah anak Tutong, Jati anak Ju and Rus anak Ajai. Those Tukang Sabak (chanters) were sharing their knowledge in Sabak Bebuah which also included the understanding of lyrics and meaning of each phrases used in Sabak Bebuah.

The efforts by the Iban community or any other body have not been seen to inhereitate the knowledge of Sabak Bebuah to the younger generations in the research district, Sebauh. The hindrance factor to inhereitate the knowledge of Sabak Bebuah is the decreasing number of Tukang Sabak (chanters). Besides that,
the change of belief from animism to Christianity has brought the greatest impact to the practise of Sabak Bebuah during the burial ceremony among the Iban community. Sabak Bebuah is probidden in the burial ceremony among the Christian. Eventhough there are hindrances and challenges in the efforts to retain Sabak Bebuah, it is hoped that Sabak Bebuah will remain as an identity to the Iban community.

8. Conclusion
As years past, Sabak Bebuah is found to be rarely presented during the burial ceremony among the Iban community in Sebauh District. The change of belief from animism to Christianity influence the presentation of Sabak Bebuah becoming lesser each time. The number of Tukang Sabak (chanters) and the knowledge in Sabak Bebuah among the younger generations become lesser. It is found that the efforts to inhereite Sabak Bebuah to the younger generations is almost none. It is therefore, the possibility of Sabak Bebuah to be dismissive from the Iban belief is very great. As stated earlier on, the Manang (sharman) is also playing an important role to ensure that the spirit of the deaces will reach the Word Of Death peacefully through the process of Pelian. The number of Manang (sharman) id getting fewer each day. This is because of the needs of Manang (sharman) in the process of guiding the spirit of the decease is getting lesser. The knowledge in ‘Pelian’ is rarely inherited to the younger generation. Without the Manang (sharman) the spirit of the decease is still living together with the living community and may brings harms to all the family members and the living community. It is hoped that the culture of Sabak Bebuah will remain sustain among the Iban community who are believing in animism and remain as an identity to the Iban community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
The researcher wish to extend the greatest thanks and appreciations to University Putra Malaysia, Dr Mohamad Maulana Magiman (Supervisor) Senior Lecturer at Faculty Science Social Department (UPMB), Dr Franklin Ragai Kundat (Co-Supervisor) Senior Lecturer at Faculty Agriculture Science and Food and all respondents to this research. The respondents to this research refers to all the heads of community consisting of the Penghulu, Tuai Rumah, Tukang Sabak (chanters) and Iban community who are believers of animism and are actively practising the Sabak Bebuah during their burial ceremony. This research might not be a successful one without the greatest cooperations from all parties.

REFERENCE


