

**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LEPA-LEPA OF THE
BAJAUS IN SEMPORNA , SABAH, MALAYSIA :
THE DESIGN, MOTIFS AND COMPONENTS**

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ABSTRACT

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LEPA-LEPA OF THE BAJAUS IN SEMPORNA , SABAH, MALAYSIA : THE DESIGN, MOTIFS AND COMPONENTS

The motifs on the carvings of the Lepa-Lepa reflect the cultural background of the Bajau community in Semporna. The presentation highlights the unique features of Lepa-Lepa and uncovers the various characteristics of Lepa-Lepa in its design, motifs and components. The analysis begins with the background of Lepa-Lepa, the types of Lepa-Lepa, the material and function of the Lepa-Lepa to the Bajau ethnic group. The focus of this research is the design of the carvings and the process of creating the Lepa-Lepa. As a traditional Bajau art, Lepa-Lepa plays a very important role in preserving the culture heritage and identity of the Bajau community in Semporna. This research hopes to help in preserving this heritage which is fast eroding with the onset of modernization.

ABSTRAK

Motif ukiran di Lepa-Lepa mencerminkan latar budaya suku kaum Bajau di Semporna. Kajian penting telah menunjukkan ciri unik Lepa-Lepa dan berbagai ciri-ciri dalaman yang terdapat pada Lepa-Lepa khasnya rekabentuk, motif dan komponen. Analisis bermula berasaskan latarbelakang Lepa-Lepa, jenis-jenis Lepa-Lepa, bahan dan fungsi perahu bagi masyarakat Bajau. Fokus penyelidikan ini adalah mengkaji rekabentuk ukiran dan proses mencipta Lepa-Lepa. Sebagai satu seni tradisi masyarakat Bajau. Lepa-Lepa memainkan peranan yang sangat penting dalam menjaga warisan budaya dan identiti kaum Bajau di Semporna. Harapan penyelidikan ini adalah untuk membantu dalam menjaga warisan ini dari arus permodenan yang rakus menghakis warisan budaya masyarakat Bajau di Semporna.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Mohd Shafie Apdal (2005:26) states, "The Lepa-Lepa can truly ignite in one a feeling of nostalgia, an emotion that clinches the history and traditions of the Bajau people not too long ago". Formerly, the Lepa-Lepa was created by the Bajau communities of Omdal as a mode of transportation. It was the only way that they could travel to neighboring islands and communicate with the outside world at that time. He goes on to say:

In 1994, the Regatta Lepa is a water festival first held to commemorate the tradition of building the Lepa-Lepa. This festival opens with the arrival of the various boats from different villages... ...The highlight of the Regatta Lepa includes a competition of the most beautiful Lepa-Lepa based on its decoration, local ethnic music and dances performed on board (Mohd Shafie Abdal, 2005:28).

The types of Lepa-Lepa most used in the Regatta Lepa festival is called "Lepa-Lepa" which has beautiful design, pattern, decoration and special characteristics showing the cultural background of the Bajau communities in Semporna.

1.2 Background of Study

As stated by Ismail Ibrahim (2007:116-128) Lepa-Lepa is characterized by beautiful design, motif and decoration which can only be found in Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia. It would be very interesting to know more about the Lepa-Lepa, but not many articles are written about it. Another reason is that there is now only one type of Lepa left ---- the Lepa-Lepa ---- which is the glory of the Bajau Semporna community today. Besides all this, Mohd Shafie Apdal



emphasized "it has been said that there has been no Lepa-Lepa that has ever sank, crediting their innovative design" (Mohd Shafie Apdal, 2005:27).

1.3 The Research Problem Statement

As a foreigner, the researcher was truly captivated by the richness of local arts in Sabah, Malaysia especially the story about the Bajau people and their Lepa-Lepa. Besides being fascinated by the beautiful designs and carvings of the Lepa-Lepa, the researcher was also impressed with the fact that no Lepa-Lepa has ever sunk. After some preparatory research, the researcher found that the Lepa-Lepa is facing some problems. Because of all these reasons, the researcher decided to do a study on Bajau Lepa-Lepa with an aim to learn more about their designs, motifs and components. The researcher also tried to understand the culture and meaning of Lepa-Lepa for the Bajau Semporna community. Lastly, the researcher had in the course of her study also proposed new ideas to protect traditional arts such as the Lepa-Lepa.

1.3.1 The Lepa-Lepa is going to disappearing

Based on the information from the annual of the Regatta Lepa, the attendance to the traditional Lepa-Lepa regatta is decreasing every year. In the regatta Lepa 2005, there were 16 traditional Lepa-Lepa, but in 2006, there were only 11, while the modern boats numbered 80.

1.3.2 Not Many People Still Can Make the Lepa-Lepa

From the beginning until now, the Sama Kubang village in Bum-Bum Island is the major area to produce the Lepa. However, today only two families still make the Lepa for sale. One is the craftsman Haji Apaka family from *Lor Sisara* village, he making the small Lepa-Lepa as the souvenir for sale. Another craftsman is Haji Bakara and his brother Haji Mohammad Musa from *Kambimbangan* village; some customers still make the Lepa-Lepa on orders.

1.3.3 The Lepa-Lepa is seldom used in the daily life of Bajau people nowadays

The uses of lepa-Lepa for water transportation, boat-dwelling and fishing are over. The Lepa-Lepa is only used in cultural ceremonies, such as the Regatta Lepa festival, held in April annually.

1.4 The Limitation of This Study

1.4.1 The Limitation of the Fieldwork

The limitations of this plan of research are: geographical field, time frame and the people observed in the fieldwork. The research field was limited to the Semporna district and focused on Bajau Kubang¹ village in Bum-Bum Island, which is near Semporna town. Based on the history, Bajau Kubang is the center for the Bajau Lepa making industry. The Lepa was first made for trading by Sama Kubang boat wrights and was adopted by the Bajau Laut² (Sather, 2000:182). The time frame of the fieldwork was divided into three parts, and one of the longest periods was two months (from March to May in the year of 2006). The sample people who have been observed were two Lepa-Lepa craftsmen's families. They are Bajau Kubang living on Bum-Bum Island.

1.4.2 The Limited Quantity of the Sample of Lepa-Lepa

Nowadays in the Bajau Semporna community, other new boats have replaced the functions of the Lepa-Lepa as a mean of water transportation, boat-dwelling and fishing instrument. Lepa-Lepa is going to disappear and Lepa-Lepa is seldom used in the daily life of Bajau people nowadays. Formerly, most of the fishermen of Bajau people were the proprietary of Lepa.

In the past, it was expected that a young man, upon marriage, would be outfitted by his family with his own Lepa so that he and his wife could begin their married life as a separate fishing unit. Virtually all men remained Lepa owners, from the time of marriage, throughout the rest of their lives. At the death of a

¹ Bajau Kubang, one of the biggest sub-groups of Bajau community in Semporna district. It is also named Sama Kubang.

² Bajau Laut, also known as Bajau Palau, it is one of the sea nomadic sub-groups of Bajau community in Semporna.

boat owner, the vessel was disassembled and its pieces were used to make the owner's coffin (Clifford Sather, 2000: 190).

Therefore, it is hard to find sample of Lepa-Lepa that had been used long time ago today. All the samples of the Lepa-Lepa collected during the fieldwork are made in recent years.

Lepa-Lepa is going to disappear. Based on the information from the annual of the Regatta Lepa, the attendance to the traditional Lepa-Lepa regatta is decreasing every year. In the Regatta Lepa 2005, there were 16 traditional Lepa-Lepa, but in 2006, there were only 11, while the modern boats numbered 80.³ Lepa-Lepa is seldom used in the daily life of Bajau people nowadays. The uses of Lepa-Lepa for water transportation, boat-dwelling and fishing are over. Lepa-Lepa is only used in cultural ceremonies, such as the Regatta Lepa festival, held in April annually.

From the beginning until now, the Sama Kubang village in Bum-Bum Island is the major area to produce the Lepa. However, today only a few families still make Lepa for sale. One is the craftsman Haji Apaka family from *Lor Sisara* village; he makes the small Lepa-Lepa as a souvenir for sale. Another craftsman is Haji Bakara and his brother Haji Mohammad Musa from *Kambimbangan* village; he still makes Lepa-Lepa on orders.

1.4.3 The Obstructions of Language and Cultural Background

Due to the different cultural background and language of the researcher with the craftsmen and designers of the Lepa-Lepa, communication was totally dependent on the translator. That may have created some barriers and errors.

1.5 The Objective of this Study

The objectives of this study part to:

- 1.5.1** To determine the types of Lepa-Lepa based on the difference in designs, motifs and components of Lepa-Lepa.

³ Haji Bastani. (45), official in charge of the Regatta Lepa 2006, interview, April, 2006.

- 1.5.2** To study the decoration of Lepa-Lepa by their design, patterns, motifs and as well as its function.
- 1.5.3** To study the components and construction technique of making Lepa-Lepa.
- 1.5.4** To understand the status of Lepa-Lepa in the Bajau Communities nowadays.

1.6 The Significance of This Research

The significance of this research is to hopefully help to:

- 1.6.1** Preserve the Bajau traditional heritage, specifically the art of creating the Lepa-Lepa, the designs and ornamentations on them.
- 1.6.2** Providing guidance for anyone who is interested in the Lepa-Lepa (either to make them or study them).
- 1.6.3** Providing references for anyone who wants to use the designs, motifs and ornamentations of the Lepa-Lepa for other purpose, such as: sample design, architecture design, interior design, fashion design, even batik design.

1.7 Hypothesis

Firstly, this research hypothesizes that the different types of the Lepa-Lepa are classified by some distinct characteristics in the similarities and differences of shapes, designs and components. Secondly, this research hypothesizes that the ornamentation of the Lepa-Lepa represented the folk culture of the Bajau community; and the influences from other communities are unapparent. Thirdly, this research hypothesizes that the technique of making Lepa-Lepa is based on traditional methods.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The Semporna district is located at the extreme south-eastern corner state of Sabah, Malaysia (Figure 2.1). Its area is about 422 square miles or 113,412 hectares (282,880 acres), and includes the mainland and 49 islands (Annual of the Regatta Lepa X, 2003: 37-38). (Figure 2.2) The Semporna district is on the maritime border of the Philippines and Indonesia. Located near to the equator, Semporna is surrounded by tropical rain forest; its daily temperature ranges from 74 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit (23 to 33 degrees Centigrade). The richness of the sea and the luxuriant forests have attracted numerous seafarers and fishermen to Semporna and its islands.

Figure 2.1: The Map of Sabah



Source: *Annual of the Regatta Lepa XI, (2004).*

Figure 2.2: The Map of Semporna



Source: Geological Department of Sabah (2005).

Because of the presence of these rich coral formations, and the location of the district at the juncture of the Sulu Archipelago and the Eastern Borneo coast, Semporna has long been a home to maritime traders and seafaring peoples ... By contrast, Semporna was historically an area in which lowland hardwoods, ideal for boat construction, were relatively plentiful (Clifford Sather, 2000: 179-182).

The major resource of Semporna is timber, derived from its rich rainforest, and timber is commonly used for making boat. As stated by Clifford Sather (2000:179-182), the communities of shore-dwelling Sama (also known as Sama Kubang) historically produced Lepa and other kinds of vessels for trade. Also, the Bajau Laut community builds boats but mostly for their own use. Today, these lowland forests are gone, and the available woods have become increasingly expensive. This is one of the reasons why new types of boats appeared are being made while the Lepa have gradually disappear during the last two decades.

Semporna is also well known for its beautiful underwater landscape in Malaysia and the Sipadan Island has become a world heritage and famous underwater diving activities in the world (Mohd Shafie Apdal, 2005: 10-11). Tourism has become a very important economic activity for Semporna. Modern lifestyle has undoubtedly crept up onto the islands and the traditional lifestyle is changing slowly. Clifford Sather (2000:179) says that the Semporna Bajau Laut began to abandon boat-dwelling from 1954, and in recent years, many of them also stopped fishing.

Formerly, the Regatta Lepa was known as Tamu Besar in the district of Semporna since 1951. In 1994, the name Regatta Lepa was used to replace the old name. The annual water festival is celebrated in April every year, and the racing of Lepa-Lepa has become a special event. The award goes to a key figure, one who has been preserving the traditional Lepa-Lepa and culture of the Bajau race in Semporna. This unique Bajau culture has spread and is now recognized by the nation. Today, the entire nation of Malaysia and the foreigners can share the inimitable traditional culture of the Bajau race; and pay homage to the Bajau legacy, the Lepa-Lepa.

2.2 The History of Bajau Community in Semporna

"Tong Talun" is the old name of Semporna, which means "inside of the forests" in the Bajau language (*Annual of the Regatta Lepa X*, 2003: 37-38). There was a luxurious forest when Semporna district was found. It was renamed "Semporna". In the Malay and Bajau language, "Semporna" literally means, "Perfect" (Mohd Shafie Apdul, 2005: 2).

A variety of local legends traces the original dispersal of the Bajau to the loss or abduction of a princess, a mythic event variously associated with the different early sultanates of the region: Johore, Malacca, Brunei, Sulu, Luwu, or Bone (Sather, 1993: 31).

The early history of the Bajau race is still not clear, however, the people of Bajau Semporna are also keeping with the original story, that is to say the original Johore homeland. It is difficult to determine how long Semporna has

been a permanent mooring place for Bajau boats; however, Pulau Umaral¹, the small island, south east of Semporna is home to the first established settlement. It is where the original Bajau tribe existed, and these expert seafarers eventually established themselves in neighboring islands and the mainland.

On the southeastern coast of Sabah, the Bajau were historically part of the Sulu zone, a maritime sphere of political and commercial interests dominated by the Sulu sultanate and its Tausung² rulers. In 1878 the territory now comprising Sabah was ceded by the sultans of Sulu and Brunei to the British North Borneo Chartered Company..... Since 1963, when Sabah gained independence within Malaysia, the Bajau, as the largest Muslim minority, have played a decisive role in state politics (Sather, 1993: 31).

The Bajau of Semporna has close relationship with the Bajau of Sulu Archipelago. The Bajau Laut communities of Semporna had spoken the dialect which closely links to the Samal groups in the neighboring Sulu Archipelago of the Philippines. According to H. Arlo Nimmo (1967:37), the Bajau of Semporna, Tawi-Tawi and Sibutu were from a single group; they are connected by many and important kinship ties and intermarriage among the three areas is still fairly common.

2.2.1 Bajau

Variants of the Malay term "Bajau" (e.g., Badjaw, Badjao, Bajo, etc.) are applied to a variety of predominantly maritime Sama-Bajau-speaking peoples whose scattered settlements are found throughout a vast region of islands and coastal littorals, extending from the southern Philippines to the northern and eastern coasts of Borneo, and eastward over much of eastern Indonesia, from Sulawesi to Timor (Sather, 1996:30).

¹ Pulau Umaral is one small island in Semporna district, also named Omadal Island.

² Tausung one group of Sama speakers, see: *Badjaws, Cultural Identity and Education*, Cabrera Augustin A, Unitas (University of Santo Tomas). 42: (1968), 107-142.

All of the scattered populations variously referred to as "Bajau" are Sama-Bajau speakers, but not all Sama-Bajau speakers are Bajau (Sather, 1993:30). Junaid Payne (2000: 34-35) states, the east coast Bajau of Sabah consists of two groups (Bajau and Bajau Laut) and many sub-groups are having different dialects and lifestyles. The land or shore-based Bajau Sama is Muslims who have increasingly adopted a cited or agricultural lifestyle in recent decades. The Bajau Kubang (or Sama Kubang) (Ismail, 2007) is the largest Bajau sub-groups in Semporna district. "Kubang" connotes stay together or congregate.

2.2.2 Bajau Laut

In Malaysia and Indonesia nomadic or formerly nomadic groups are known as "Bajau Laut" or "Orang Laut" (sea people). In Sulu and south-eastern Sabah, boat-dwelling groups and those with a recent history of boat-nomadism identify themselves as "Sama Dilaut" or "Sama Mandilaut" (sea Sama). They are referred to by other Sama speakers as "Sama Pala'au" (or "Pala'u") and by Tausug as "luwa'an." Both names have pejorative connotations, reflecting the pariah status generally ascribed to boat-nomads by those living ashore (Sather, 1993:30).

The Bajau Laut was defined primarily by their boat-dwelling way of life (Sather, 2005: 180). The Bajau Laut is boat-dwellers and mostly non-Muslim, who rarely ventured for long onto land. Bajau Laut society consists of family units, one per boat, without formal communal leadership (Junaidi Payne, 2000: 34-35). In the Semporna district, small sea-nomadic communities historically formed an integral part of the local Bajau population. The sea gypsies, who have retained their drifting seafaring lifestyle, skimmed the waters in their boathouses, using the reef in their forage for food.

2.3 Religion of the Bajau Community in Semporna

Inherently, the Bajau believe in a variety of supernatural beings, for example: ghosts, spirits, vampires and sorcerers (Abalahin, 1998: 76-79). However, in the early 17th century, Islam was first introduced to the Bajaus (Mohd Shafie Apdal, 2005: 26). The Bajaus are Sunni Muslims. The statuses of different Bajau

groups have differences in degrees of Islamic practice. The Bajau Laut is the most peripheral group, seen by others as non-Muslims. Because of their boat-nomadic life, Bajau Laut lack mosques. For those ashore, such as the Bajau Kubang, the mosque represents the primary focus of community leadership and religion (Sather, 1993:30).

2.4 Economic Background of Bajau Communities in Semporna

Nowadays, the economic activity of Semporna has changed to three major areas: agriculture 65%, fishery 30% and business 5%. Planting oil palms has become the major income of the people of Semporna, and fishery is the second one (Except tourist income) (*Annual of the Regatta Lepa XI*, 2004: 37). In recent years, modern lifestyle has undoubtedly crept into this district. Many people have also stopped fishing and make their living today by other occupations, regular jobs in business and government. However, as stated by Clifford Sather, fishing is the major kind of livelihood:

In Sabah, where the Bajau comprise less than 20 percent of the population, they make up over two-thirds of the fishermen of state. For many groups, although by no means all, fishing is the principal source of livelihood. However, except for the Bajau Laut, other communities are economically flexible, adopting farming where land is available, or taking up other occupations (Sather, 1993: 30).

Clifford Sather (1993: 30) also says, some Bajau Kubang boat craftsmen made a specialized living as boat wrights, and the Lepa not only sell to the Bajau Laut that are living in Semporna district, but also as far as the Bajau Laut in the Sulu Archipelago:

In addition to political clientage and traditional procurement relations, ties between different Sama groups in Semporna tended to be characterized by local exchange-based specializations. Sama Kubang communities present around the northeastern shore of Bum-Bum³ Island historically specialized in a variety of

³ Bum-Bum Island is one big island closed with Semporna town.

craft industries in addition, a number of village men made a specialized living as boatwrights. These boats were specifically for the Bajau Laut, not only for those living in Semporna, but for others as well. Thus, Sama Dilaut from Sitangkai, in the adjacent Sibutu Island Group of Sulu, regularly traveled to the district to commission Sama Kubang builders to construct Lepa, returning at a pre-arranged date to take possession of the completed boat. In smaller numbers, other Sama Dilaut came from Bongao and Sanga-Sanga, and from as far as in the Sulu Archipelago as the Siasi Island Group (Sather, 2000: 179).

2.5 Definition of Lepa and Lepa-Lepa

Lepa is one of the small boats in the Bajau boat category. According to the dictionary (Language Bureau, Third Edition 1993:789), the term "Lepa" means boat. Another definition of "Lepa" means the boat which really sails in the sea; and "Lepa-Lepa" means a souvenir of boat carved by a single piece of wood as an adornment (*Annual of the Regatta Lepa XI*, 2004: 36). But, for normal people and even some writers, they always use the two words "Lepa-Lepa" or "lipa-lipa" to call the real boat in the sea and also the souvenir of boat carving. This is because the pronunciation is more polite and softer. To avoid garbling the meaning of the two words "Lepa" and "Lepa-Lepa", in this thesis, all of the word ---- "Lepa" is a general name of Bajau boat which is used by Bajau community. In the same way, all the word "Lepa-Lepa" means a type of Lepa with has special design and function as their fishing boat, transportation, home and celebration. However, the Sabah Museum described the definition of Lepa as a sail boat used as transport:

Lipa⁴ is a kind of sail boat in Bajau Semporna community. It is used to transporting barter – trade goods in the waters around the small islands of Borneo, Indonesia, and Philippines. It is carved with "Kelong" (Bahagian buritan perahu yang dibuat khusus dan mempunyai ukiran), floral and faunal patterns (Figure 2.3).

⁴ Lipa means boat, same as "Lepa", the information is from the Sabah Museum.

Lepa-Lepa is a voyage vessel that is produced by the Bajau Semporna society. It has many elements of art in decoration as compared to other boats. They used it for boat-dwelling, fishing instrument, public transport and on special occasion, such as cultural festivals, wedding celebration and funeral.

Figure 2.3: Lepa-Lepa of Sabah Museum



Source: [http:// www.mzm.sabah.gov.my/heritagevillage/lipalipa.htm](http://www.mzm.sabah.gov.my/heritagevillage/lipalipa.htm)

2.6 The History of Lepa-Lepa

In the beginning, Lepa existed in the fishermen of Bajau Kubang, who lived in the shore of islands in Semporna district (Regatta Lepa 2000 Semporna: 27-28). Based on Bajau Semporna society's verbal tradition, the Lepa existed earlier than the nineteenth century.⁵ A picture and photograph recorded in the Bajau Semporna community is given in Figure 2.4. This is supported by the opinion of H. Arlo Nimmo. He says:

Among the Sulu Bajau, the outriggerless boat, the lipa, is recent, having first come into the archipelago from the east coast of Borneo, probably in the early 1900's (Nimmo, 1968: 45).

⁵ Haji Bakara (67), Kabinbangan village, Bum-Bum Island, Semporna, interview. March, 2006.

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