

# THE CONSTRUCTION AND CONTESTATION OF ISLAMIC IDENTITY OF THE BAJO PEOPLE IN WAKATOBI ISLANDS, SOUTH EAST SULAWESI, INDONESIA

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## ABSTRAK

*Orang Bajo dikenal sebagai orang laut yang mempunyai keyakinan asli mereka sendiri, yaitu keyakinan kepada para penguasa laut. Namun demikian, orang Bajo juga mengaku bahwa mereka adalah seorang Muslim. Oleh karena itu, identitas keagamaan orang Bajo merupakan sebuah perpaduan yang unik antara keyakinan Islam dengan keyakinan asli mereka. Perpaduan yang unik ini tidak hanya diekspresikan dalam kehidupan religius mereka dalam ritual dan peribadatan, namun juga dalam nilai-nilai adat-istiadat mereka sebagai pedoman bagi perilaku sehari-hari. Makalah ini akan membahas proses pembentukan dan pergulatan identitas keagamaan orang Bajo, dalam hubungannya dengan lingkungan alam, sosial, dan keagamaannya. Pergulatan identitas keagamaan orang Bajo terjadi dalam tiga aspek, yaitu pergulatan antara “Islam orang laut” melawan “Islam orang darat”, “Islam resmi” dari pemerintah melawan “Islam tradisional” yang dianut orang Bajo, dan tantangan modernitas, terutama komodifikasi atas ekspresi keagamaan orang Bajo. Proses pergulatan dalam identitas keagamaan orang Bajo ini pada gilirannya akan mewarnai proses pembentukan identitas keagamaan mereka menuju perkembangan yang lebih adaptif.*

**Kata Kunci:** Bajo, identitas keislaman, Wakatobi

## ABSTRACT

On the one hand, the Bajo people are well-known as ‘the sea people’ who have their own indigenous belief system – belief in the Lord of the Sea. On the other hand, they also acknowledge themselves as Muslims. Thus, the religious identity of the Bajo people reflects a unique combination of Islamic teachings and their indigenous beliefs. This unique combination is not only expressed in their religious life, in their rituals and worship practices, but also in the values found in their customary practices (*adat*) as a guiding system for their life. This paper examines the construction and contestation of the religious identity of the Bajo people, especially how they construct their identities in relation to their natural, social, and religious environments. The contestation of the Bajo religious identity covers three aspects: the contestation of the Islam of ‘the sea people’ against the Islam of ‘the land people’, the contestation of the ‘official’ Islam against the ‘traditional’ Islam, and the challenges of modernity, especially the commodification of the Bajo religious expressions. This contestation, in turn, reconstructs their religious identity into a more adaptive one.

**Keywords:** Bajo, Islamic identity, Wakatobi

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bajo people are well-known as ‘the sea people’ who live over a wide territory in Southeast Asian waters. They probably also live scattered in other areas, because they were formerly sea wanderers or sea nomadic people. They wandered the sea with their traditional boats, called *leppa*. Nevertheless, in recent times, most of them already live in sedentary communities. In fact, “Bajo” is the name given to them by land people, while they call themselves “*Sama*”. The terms used to refer to them also vary depending on the locations of their settlements. For example, the term “*Bajo*” or “*Orang Bajo* (Bajo people)” is usually used in eastern Indonesia, while in the western part of Indonesia, they are called “*Orang Laut* (sea people)” or “*Suku Laut* (sea tribes)” or “*Rakyat Laut* (sea subjects)”.

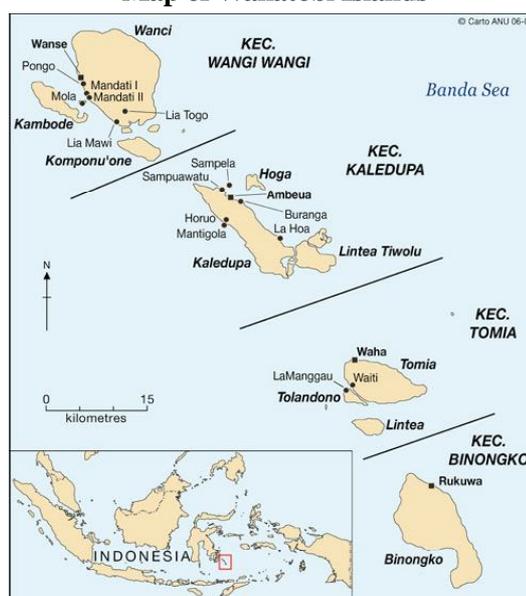
The Bajo people identify themselves as “*sama*” people, and identify “the other” or people outside their ethnic group as “*bagai*.” The life of the *sama* people is identical to sea-life so they consider *bagai* or “the other” as the land people or land-life. Although the Bajo people live in different places, they still consider themselves as the *sama* people. According to them, they are “*sama*” (the same), wherever they are located, while “*bagai*” meaning “various”, describes land people who are different and vary from one to another place.<sup>1</sup>

Considering all this, actually the sea people can be called a “multinational” or “transnational” ethnic group. Although they have different names based on the locations of their settlements, from a cultural point of view, they share similar characteristics that can be considered as their cultural identity. The similar physical characteristics include, for example, their language, customs, beliefs, and patterns of behavior. Other characteristics in their life are that they always build their settlements in coastal regions, and have professions as traditional subsistent fishermen. Based on the similarities of these cultural aspects, therefore, they can be regarded as one distinct ethnic group with a shared origin.

As sea people, the Bajo have an indigenous belief system, which is strongly shaped by their natural environment. They believe in the Lord of the sea, called *Mbo Ma Dilao*, who guards the sea. *Mbo Ma Dilao* is actually an incarnation of their great ancestors who hold an extraordinary supernatural power over the sea. Besides their indigenous belief in *Mbo Ma Dilao*, the Bajo also acknowledge that they are Muslims. This acknowledgement means that the Bajo also recognize Islam as an important part of their religious identity. Therefore, the religious identity of the Bajo is actually a unique combination of their indigenous belief in the Lord of the sea and Islamic teachings and values. This unique combination is not only expressed in their religious life, in rituals and worship practices, but also in values of their customary practices (*adat*) as a guiding system for their life.

This research was conducted through observations with the involvement of the Bajo who lived in the Wakatobi Islands located off the southeast coast of Sulawesi and consisting of four major islands: *Wangi-wangi*, *Kaledupa*, *Tomia*, and *Binongko*. Wakatobi actually is the acronym of those four major islands. The map of Wakatobi Islands is presented in the figure below:

Picture 1  
Map of Wakatobi Islands<sup>2</sup>



Field research was conducted on two Bajo villages in Wakatobi Islands, Mola and Mantigola. In Wakatobi Islands, Mola is the most populated Bajo village, while Mantigola is the oldest or the first-built Bajo village. This research focused on the analysis of the construction and contestation of the Bajo religious identity, especially regarding three aspects: (1) how the Bajo construct their identities in relation to their environments, especially their natural, social, and religious environments; (2) what factors influence the construction of their identity, especially those related to history and religion; and (3) how the Bajo experience and respond to the external influences and pressures on their identity.

### **THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BAJO RELIGIOUS IDENTITY**

The indigenous belief of the Bajo, which is the belief in the Lord of the sea, or *Mbo Ma Dilao*, is strongly shaped by their natural environment. As sea people who were formerly sea-wanderers or sea nomads, they now still build their settlements over the water. This implies that the life of the Bajo cannot be separated from the sea. Their life is always attached to the sea which also shapes their indigenous beliefs, especially the belief in the supernatural power over the sea and beyond themselves. The Bajo recognize that the supernatural powers that guard the sea are their ancestors, called *Mbo Ma Dilao*. The term “*Mbo*” itself in the Bajo language is used to call the elders. Therefore, *Mbo Ma Dilao* literally means “our ancestors (grandparents) who guard the sea”. The belief in the supernatural power or spirit of the ancestors which is manifested in ancestors worship is the oldest form of belief in the history of mankind.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to their indigenous beliefs, all the Bajo people who live spread across several nation states also acknowledge themselves as Muslims. Being Muslim is a part of their unitary cultural identity. Therefore, it is important to look at the stories about how they became Muslims since they give us some insights into Bajo migration history,

as well as the culture of the Bajo people. According to the story told by Pak Naseng, a Bajo figure, in the past, the Bajo were living in the Johor Kingdom during the reign of Paramasuni.<sup>4</sup> Paramasuni made it compulsory for all Johor people, including the Bajo, to convert to Hinduism, to worship Hindu gods. The Bajo refused this obligation from the King because they already had their own gods, the Lord of the sea, *Mbo Ma Dilao*, their ancestors. Pak Naseng linked the Bajo refusal to worship Hindu gods to the process of their birth and their existence. The Bajo consider that their origin was from the sea because when a Bajo baby is born, his or her placenta is left to drift out to sea. This is because they also believe that the sea is the great heirloom or heritage from their ancestors who guard the sea as the Lord of the sea.

Because of their refusal, the Bajo were expelled from Johor Kingdom by Paramasuni. In their flight to seek refuge, they drifted ashore in Aceh; at that time, according to Pak Naseng, Aceh was an Islamic Sultanate ruled by Sultan Malikussaleh.<sup>5</sup> Malikussaleh, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Sultan, accepted the Bajo to live in Aceh and taught them Islam. Pak Naseng stressed that besides being a Sultan, Malikussaleh was also an Islamic religious leader<sup>6</sup> (*ulama*) and a powerful figure, because he owned supernatural power. With his supernatural power, he helped to cure the Bajo when they fell ill. Pak Naseng related that whoever got sick, when he or she drank water from the royal fountain, he or she would be cured. Thus, the Bajo really appreciated and honored Malikussaleh and ascribed him as their leader and a great figure to follow. This is also the reason why the Bajo accepted Islam without abandoning their indigenous beliefs.

Due to the propensity of the Bajo to sail and wander the sea, and because they were famous as excellent sailors, Malikussaleh used the Bajo for sea transportation and in his naval forces. In the sea transportation, the Bajo played a significant role for the distribution of goods and commodities and also the mobility of people around Southeast Asian waters. The main sea transportation route at that time was through Sumatra, the Malacca Straits,

the Java Sea, and then east to Sulawesi and Maluku. The Bajo transported goods and people with their boats along this route.

After Malikussaleh passed away, the Bajo accepted Datuk ri Bandang as their leader. Datuk ri Bandang was known as an Islamic figure who spread Islam to Sulawesi in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He originated from Minangkabau and stayed for some time in Aceh. According to Pak Naseng, those who transported and accompanied Datuk ri Bandang for his journey to Sulawesi were actually the Bajo. Datuk ri Bandang landed in Gowa and started to spread Islam in Sulawesi. Due to marriages between the Bajo who accompanied Datuk ri Bandang and royal families of Gowa, descendants were born and later generated the genealogical line of the King of Gowa.<sup>7</sup>

Based on this narration, Pak Naseng said that historically the Bajo made an important contribution to build the foundation of the Gowa Kingdom due to the marriage with a Bajo woman whereby the King could generate his descendants and successors to rule and establish the existence of the Gowa Kingdom. The Bajo's important foundational role for the Gowa Kingdom is reflected in the Bugis traditional proverb: "*una tea torijene, tea i Somba ri Gowa*", which means "if there was no people that came from the sea (Bajo), then there would be no *Somba* (King) in Gowa". That is why the relationship between the Bajo and people from Bugis-Makassar is very close, even the Bajo consider the Bugis to still have a family relationship with them.<sup>8</sup>

The Bajo's role in sea transportation leads to a second possibility as to why Islam was accepted by the Bajo. According to Pak Manan, another Bajo figure, Islam was introduced to the Bajo by Islamic leaders and teachers (*ulamas*) who were preaching and spreading Islam in Nusantara (Indonesian archipelago). Pak Manan then pointed out that Islam in Nusantara was spread through commerce, especially by merchants from Gujarat. Since these merchants were transported by the Bajo with their boats, during the journey to their destination, the Gujarat merchants introduced Islam to the Bajo.

In the beginning, Islam was introduced to the Bajo personally or as individuals, and not yet totally as a society or an ethnic group. But later, in the following process, some Bajo who already knew Islam then spread it to other Bajos, either from one settlement to another, or on some occasions when they met each other. These speculations about Bajo conversion to Islam identify them as, therefore, some of the earliest followers of the religion in the Indonesian archipelago.

## THE EXPRESSION OF THE BAJO RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

The Bajo religious identity is clearly expressed in three important events: first, in rituals of life cycle events; second, in traditional or *adat* rituals; and third, in celebration of Islamic Holy Days. Rituals of life cycle events include birth, circumcision, marriage, and death. When a baby is born, they will cut the baby's umbilical cord while saying: "*kuluabalahu*" or "*kulubalau*", which resembles a Quranic verse "*Qulhuallahu*" (*Ahad*). Soon, the baby is bathed with sea water as a sign of request that later when he grows up, he will become an excellent sailor. The umbilical cord is cut to separate the baby with his or her placenta, and then the placenta is left to drift out to sea.<sup>9</sup> The Bajo believe that the placenta is the baby's twin sibling. If the baby gets sick, then it is because of something wrong happening to his twin sibling in the sea.

When the boy enters early teenage years, he must be circumcised. The ritual for circumcision (*pasunatan*) is usually conducted when the boy reaches 10-12 years old. The *pasunatan* ritual is a kind of "Islamic initiation" which indicates that the boy already has ended his childhood and is entering adulthood. This transition phase means that he should do the obligatory things in Islamic teachings. Therefore, the *pasunatan* ritual is also an indicator that the boy will "officially enter Islam". After he is circumcised, it is obligatory for him to obey Islamic Sharia (Islamic teachings), such as the obligation to pray five times a day, and it will be sinful if neglected. Regarding the importance of

circumcision, Sopher maintained that circumcision is the clear indicator that these sea people are Muslim.<sup>10</sup>

When someone reaches an adult age, it had better for him or her to marry, something that is strongly recommended in Islamic teaching. In the view of the Bajo, marriage (*panikahan*) is something sacred and important, because for the couple, *panikahan* will raise their status and honour.<sup>11</sup> For a man, he will have a full responsibility to lead the family, and for a woman, she will have an obligation to manage the family and the household. In the marriage ceremony, a man must give *mahar* (bride wealth) to the woman he wants to marry. The payment of *mahar* itself is obligatory in Islam, but the implementation is adapted within the atmosphere of the Bajo culture. In the Bajo tradition, the *mahar* is counted in the standard of real, which is the Arabic currency. The amount of the *mahar* to be paid depends on the social status (*strata*) of the married couple, both the man and the woman, as well as the background of their family. The amount of the *mahar* then is established by the *adat* (traditional customary) calculation.

In the last stage of human life cycle, the Bajo believe that death is the return of a human being to God the Creator (*Pappu Allah Ta'alla*). When any death happens, soon after the Bajo people gather in the house of the dead person. Information about death is based on reports that are quickly spread in the community. Soon all activities are stopped, even when they are about to go out to the sea. All of the treatment of the dead body follows the Islamic requirements. The dead body should be bathed, covered by white satin, and should be prayed for, to ask for blessing and mercy from God. When bathing the dead body, fresh water is used instead of sea water, because the bathing is meant to purify the dead person before returning to The Creator. The dead body is then carried by boat to be buried in the closest land. After burial, then they return to the house of the dead person and prepare the ritual to solemnize the dead person. The ritual to solemnize the dead person is conducted by reciting the Quran

and continues until the seventh day after the death.

The Bajo traditional or *adat* rituals are vary, starting from the simplest ones such as asking for blessing and safety when they are about to go to the sea, or healing rituals, to the greatest ritual called *duata*. Basically, in these traditional or *adat* rituals, customary values, the traditional values, and cultural values of the Bajo are manifested in their life. Most traditional Bajo rituals are healing rituals including *duata* as the greatest ritual of the Bajo. According to the Bajo's belief, the cause of sickness is disharmonious relationships between people and nature, or people with other persons, or with God. Therefore, the purpose of a healing ritual is to re-harmonize these relationships.

In general, the traditional or *adat* rituals are carried out by preparing offerings to the Lord of the sea, which are left to drift out to the sea. In healing rituals, the offerings should be prepared by the sick person, and the ritual is carried out in the house of the sick person, and then the offerings are drifted to the sea. The Bajo traditional or *adat* rituals are led by *sanro*, or a kind of Bajo traditional shaman. The offerings to be prepared are different in each ritual, but usually there are some common materials, such as betel nut, betel leaves, lime, *gambier*, and tobacco. The combination of the Bajo indigenous belief and Islamic belief is reflected in the chant or invocation (*mantra*) of the rituals. For example, in the invocation to ask blessing and protection when the Bajo are about to go to the sea is as follows<sup>12</sup>:

<i>Bismillahirrahmanirrahim</i>	(Bismillahirrahmanirrahim
<i>Opapu oh Mbo Ma Dilao</i>	Oh God, Oh <i>Mbo Ma Dilao</i>
<i>Oh Mbo Tambira</i>	Oh <i>Mbo Tambira</i>
<i>Daha aku</i>	please do not reprimand me
<i>Sasapata madilao</i>	and please remove any disturbance in the sea)

As presented above, the Islamic prayer "*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*" is combined with the request to *Mbo Ma Dilao*, the Lord of the sea, to ask for protection and avoid any hindrance and disturbance while at sea.

The ritual named *kaka'* (literally means elder sibling) is a healing ritual conducted to restore the

relationship between a Bajo with his or her “elder sibling”, which is his or her placenta that drifted out to sea. The sickness due to the disharmonious relationship between a Bajo and his or her “elder sibling” will result in the loss or decrease of his or her *sumanga*’ (spirit). The symptoms of this sickness usually can be seen when a person becomes lazy, indolent, lamenting, or even involved in conflict with others. Therefore, the purpose of ritual *kaka*’ is to restore the *sumanga*’ of the person, because his or her *sumanga*’ was taken by his or her elder sibling, or to restore the *sumanga*’ of the sick person and his or her elder sibling simultaneously, because both *sumanga*’ are not in a good condition.

In relation to the birth of a Bajo baby, his or her placenta that was drifted to the sea is considered to be his or her twin sibling. According to Pak Udin, a Bajo Islamic leader, the twin sibling (*kagumbaran*) of the baby is always manifested in two forms, either *kuta* (octopus) or *tuli* (crocodile). Looking at its characteristics, *kuta* is male and *tuli* is female. Normally, the *kagumbaran* of the baby will be the reverse of his or her gender. If the baby is boy, then his *kagumbaran* is *tuli* or crocodile, and if the baby is girl, then her *kagumbaran* is *kuta* or octopus. Based on the form of the *kagumbaran* of the baby, either *kuta* or *tuli*, then if the baby is grown up and he or she is struck by a certain sickness because of the disharmonious relationship between their *kagumbaran*, a ritual should be conducted to re-harmonize the relationship between a person with his or her *kagumbaran*, which, in turn, can heal the sickness.

The greatest ritual of the Bajo is called *duata* which actually is also a form of healing ritual, but its meaning is much more than just to heal sickness. *Duata* reflects all aspects of life of the Bajo in symbolic forms including their philosophy, way of life, cosmology, the meaning of human life and humanity, and how the Bajo give meaning to their life. That is why the Bajo acknowledge that *duata* is the greatest reflection of the Bajo culture. In a narrower sense, the word “*duata*” is an adaptation of Bajo language from the word “*dewata*”, which means “gods”. Therefore, *duata* ritual means a

request to the gods to heal sickness. However, in a broader sense, the meaning of *duata* is much deeper. According to Pak Udin, the word “*duata*” is a combination from two sub-word, “*dua*” and “*ta*”. “*Dua*” means “two”, and “*ta*” means “*kita*”. Therefore, *duata* means the “two meanings of *kita*”. The two meanings of “*kita*”, either it means “we” or it means “You”, but the latter is addressed to the higher or honorable person.

The reason why *duata* means the two meaning of *kita* is that it deals with the relationship between the ritual leader of *duata* with something supernatural, the higher and the stronger power beyond him, either it is spirit, gods, or even can be God the Highest. In the beginning, the ritual leader calls this supernatural power “*kita*” which means “You”, because he considers that the supernatural power is higher and stronger than himself. This process is also a request to make himself to be close to the honorable supernatural power, and in some sense “to invite” the supernatural power “to enter” in himself, in his body, and “to unite” with him. After the supernatural power already enters his body, both of them are united, and there is no distance between them, they are one. Therefore, the term used to call this united being is still “*kita*”, but now it means “we” or “us”. This is precisely the core meaning of *duata* which is the mystical meaning of the ritual – the expression of the union between human beings and the supernatural being beyond them.

As the greatest Bajo traditional ritual, *duata* is conducted in seven days and seven nights continuously, including for its preparation. The sick people are firstly being bathed with fresh water to purify them from their sin. The container of the water is made from clay as a symbol that man is originated from soil and will return into soil. After being bathed, then they are wiped with bunched coconut seed to drive out the sickness from them. During this process, *sanro* as a ritual leader prays for them with reciting invocation accompanied by the beat of *gendang*, the traditional Bajo music play. After a while, the spirit or supernatural power enters into *sanro*’s body, and he seems being in trance.

This condition also happens to all the sick people, they are also being in trance. After that, the spirit comes out from *sanro*'s and all sick people's bodies meaning that their sickness also comes out (cured). This ritual finally ends up by drifting offerings out to the sea.

The important Islamic holy Days that are usually celebrated by Muslims are Ramadan (the fasting month), Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha. The celebrations of Islamic holy Days in the Bajo settlement seem not much different from the celebrations in other places in the land, except that the Bajo celebrate it in their mosque built above the sea water in their settlement. The way the Bajo celebrate Islamic holy Days to some extent is unique and differs from the way that takes place on the land, because they adapt them to the natural environment of their settlement that is built over the sea. For example, in the night before Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, young Muslims chant *takbir* (*Allahu Akbar*) while walking around their village. The Bajo usually do this chanting with their boat around their village and they will do it on foot only when the sea is at low tide, when it is impossible for their boats to float.

The most unique Islamic celebration of the Bajo is on the event of Eid al-Adha where some Muslims who are financially able will do a sacrifice, usually of a goat or a sheep. Some Bajo also do sacrifice at Eid al-Adha. They will buy a goat or a sheep from people living on the land, bring it to their settlement by boat, and tie it to their house over the water. The sacrifice of the animal itself is conducted in front of the mosque after the Eid al-Adha prayer. The Bajo feel that they have a strong responsibility to do the sacrifice, because they dedicate the sacrifice to their forefathers who already passed away before them. Even for the Bajo who do not have the financial capability to do the sacrifice, they will save their money with an expectation that they will be able to do the sacrifice some time in the future. Indeed, in Islamic teaching it is allowed to dedicate the sacrifice to someone, but it is not a substantial one. However, for the Bajo, the sacrifice also means devotion to

their forefathers. This belief seems strongly to be influenced by their indigenous belief which is the legacy of ancestor worship in the form of devotion to their ancestors who guard the sea.

## **THE CONTESTATION OF THE BAJO RELIGIOUS IDENTITY**

The contestation over the Bajo religious identity can be identified in three main areas: first, the contestation between the Islamic religiosity of the sea people versus the land people, or it can be said "Islam *sama*" versus "Islam *bagai*". Second, the contestation between official or organized Islam, directed and maintained by the government, and traditional Islam, expressed and practiced by traditional communities, in this case by the Bajo themselves. This contestation also can be portrayed as "official Islam versus traditional Islam". Third, the challenge of the exploitation of the uniqueness of the Bajo religious expression. This challenge particularly takes place in the form of commodification of the Bajo traditional rituals, how it is exploited and performed for the sake of tourist promotion, either by the Wakatobi regency government or other private parties.

The most striking indication of the contestation between Islam *sama* and Islam *bagai* is the accusation the land Muslims addressed to the Bajo that they are "*shirk*" (allying God the One with others). This accusation is based on the fact that even though the Bajo are Muslims, they still practice rituals and worships to their ancestors obviously indicated when they send offerings adrift to the sea. These kind of practices are considered *shirk* because they indicate that the Bajo still acknowledge the power of supernatural beings other than the One God, which violates the most basic principle of Islam, *Tawhid*, to acknowledge and worship only One God the Highest (*Allah Ta'ala*). What the Bajo do by sending offerings adrift to the sea also reflects that they are asking for help and protection from supernatural entities other than God the One. This practice is extremely prohibited in Islam since the basic teaching of Islam obliges

Muslims to ask for help and protection only from the One God.

Because of this accusation, it opens the possibility for the influence of Islam from the land to enter the Bajo community in the sea. This “intrusion” of Islam *bagai* to Islam *sama* is based on the “justification” that the land Muslims think they should teach the “true Islam” or the “pure Islam” to the Bajo. The form to execute this intention is by sending land Muslim preachers to preach (*da'wah*) in Bajo mosques. This purpose is not only done by land Muslims as individuals, but also supported by Islamic organizations, with their motivation to get more members and adherents. The other form is sending land Muslim teachers to teach Bajo children how to recite the Quran and basic Islamic knowledge and practices, either in Bajo mosques in the form of non-formal education (*Taman Pendidikan Al-Quran*), or in Islamic formal schools (*madrasah*).

Because of this contestation, *sama* Muslims are now split into two categories, the elders who retain Islam based on traditional values and teachings taught by their forefathers, and the young that accept the Islamic teachings taught by *bagai* Muslims. Pak Udin told how this situation happens: “The elders always watch what happened in the mosque. When they see any prayer or service led by land Muslims, they will not attend it. That is why only the young come to the mosque now. Otherwise, when the prayer or service is led by our people (*sama*), usually in Friday prayer, then the elders will come to the mosque. The elders say that “nothing taught by the land Muslim preachers is in accordance with what was taught to us by our forefathers.”

The contestation of official Islam versus traditional Islam is more or less similar, but “the agent” or “the actor” is the government against the Bajo. The Indonesian government has the authority to administer the religiosity of its citizens, which is carried out under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The smallest branch of the Ministry of Religious Affairs is the Office of Religious Affairs (*Kantor Urusan Agama* – KUA) which has authority at the

district level. The program or policy of this Office to administer official Islam is also quite similar – they send official Islamic preachers to educate citizens about the proper official Islam including to the Bajo in their mosques. The KUA is located on the land, but it has an authority over all villages in the district including Bajo villages in the sea. Therefore, the response of the Bajo is also similar toward the official Islamic programs. The Bajo consider official Islamic preachers also as *bagai* Muslims since they also come from the land.

Nevertheless, to some extent, the resistance of the Bajo against the official Islamic program is not that strong. They still follow some policies issued by the KUA in terms of the technical manner of religious obedience. Probably the Bajo feel that the program is also beneficial for them so they decide to follow it. For example, in the case of the obligation to pay *zakat fitrah* (a tithe), it should be paid with raw materials of staple food, such as rice, corn, cassava, etc. The KUA issues a policy that *zakat fitrah* can be paid with money or cash equivalents to the amount of raw materials of staple food. In recent times, the Bajo prefer to pay *zakat fitrah* with money because it is easier for them rather than to pay it with raw materials of staple food. The other case is the Bajo also prefer to follow the official policy on the decision of the exact date of Islamic holy Days such as Eid al-Fitr and the beginning of Ramadan (the fasting month) rather than rely on their own astronomic calculation.

The next challenge for the religiosity of the Bajo in Wakatobi is the commodification of their cultural and religious expression. The most obvious challenge was to their greatest religious expression: *duata*. Since the beginning of Wakatobi serving as an autonomous regency, the regent once stated that “The Bajo do not have *adat*”. This statement implies that the Bajo are an uncivilized society, because they do not have culture. This statement, of course, made the Bajo angry. Some of Bajo leaders suggested that they should perform *duata* to prove that in fact they do have *adat*, but some other leaders rejected this suggestion considering that *duata* is actually the highest representation

of the Bajo culture. *Duata* is a ritual, a sacred and transcendental religious ceremony, and cannot be justified merely as an art performance. *Duata* is also a healing ritual performed to heal sick people, and when it is performed without purpose, the sickness will strike back to the Bajo all over their village. Moreover, because of this debate, the Bajo figures and even the society in general are split into two sides – those who agree and those who disagree that *duata* can be performed in public as an art performance.

However, *duata* is performed in public though, by some Bajo who agree to do it, to show that the Bajo in fact do have their own *adat*. This performance even gets full support by the Wakatobi regency government especially in terms of financial support because it is financially beneficial to perform *duata*. The performance of *duata* is even managed frequently in order to promote tourism in Wakatobi. As new regency, the Wakatobi government wants to make tourism a leading sector for regional development, and the performance of *duata* has become part of this policy. Meanwhile, the Bajo who disagree with the public performance of *duata* can only raise a warning that at some time in the future the great sickness in the form of an epidemic disease or some kind of disaster will strike the Bajo society. This disaster surely would happen because of the desacralization of *duata* from the greatest Bajo ritual to be merely an art performance. The misconduct of *duata* is similar to treating the greatest cultural legacy of the Bajo as mere trivia.

## CONCLUSION

The religious identity of the Bajo is a unique combination of Islamic teachings and their indigenous beliefs which is manifested in the form of rituals, worship, and traditional values of the Bajo *adat* as guidance for their life. The indigenous belief of the Bajo – the belief in the Lord of the sea, *Mbo Ma Dilao* – is strongly shaped by their natural environment. As the sea people, the Bajo are always attached to the sea, and they believe that the supernatural powers holding control over the sea are

the incarnation of their ancestors. Because of their nature as sea people, the Bajo are formerly known as the sea wanderers and sea nomads, and are certainly excellent sailors. The Bajo are considered among the first ethnic groups who embraced Islam in the Indonesian archipelago because when they once landed in Aceh after their flight from Johor, they accepted Islam taught by Malikussaleh, the leader of the first Islamic kingdom in the Indonesian archipelago. The second possibility is that the Bajo received Islam directly from Islamic merchants and preachers whom they transported with their boats to the destinations they wanted to trade with and to spread Islam around the archipelago.

In recent times, the religiosity of the Bajo receives many challenges which can be seen as the contestation of their religious identity. The challenges toward the Bajo as the sea people do not only come from the land people, but also from the government in administering the official forms of religiosity toward the citizens. The contestation of the Bajo religious identity takes place in three major areas which are: the contestation between “Islam *sama*” and “Islam *bagai*”, the contestation between “official Islam” and “traditional Islam”, and the challenge of commodification of Bajo religious expression. Based on the concept that identity is always in the process of construction and negotiation, the contestation of religious identity of the Bajo is part of the process and dynamics of the construction of their religious identity which will, in turn, reconstruct and reshape their religious identity into a more adaptive formation and development.

## Notes:

- 1 see Anwar, *Kajian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Bajo, Tinjauan Historis dan Kontemporer*, (tulisan tidak diterbitkan), (Kendari: Univ. Haluoleo, 2006).; Heddy Shri Ahimsa-Putra, *Strukturalisme Levi-Strauss*, (Yogyakarta: Kepel Press, 2006); Saifudin, *Menjaga Tradisi, Membangun Identitas: Konstruksi Identitas “Orang Laut” di Pulau Saponda*, Universitas Gadjah Mada,

- Yogyakarta, 2009).
- 2 source: Natasha Stacey, *Boats to burn: Bajo fishing activity in the Australian fishing zone*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007), p. 13.
  - 3 see Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 2011) dan Henri Chambert-Loir & Anthony Reid (eds.), *The Potent Dead*. (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).
  - 4 Kemungkinan yang dimaksud Pak Naseng dengan Paramasuni adalah Parameswara, pendiri kerajaan Malaka, dan lokasinya adalah di Malaka, bukan Johor. Parameswara dalam dialek Cina disebut *Pai-li-mi-su-la* dan mungkin diadaptasi oleh logat Bajo sebagai "Paramasuni". Namun, ketika melihat periode sejarah, seharusnya dia sezaman dengan Malikussaleh dari Aceh pada 1267-1297, yang sesungguhnya periode Parameswara adalah seabad kemudian ketika ia memerintah Malaka (1405-1414). Mungkin, itu memang benar-benar Paramasuni, pendahulu dari Parameswara, dan berada di Johor. Agar lebih jelas, lihat Leonard Andaya, *Leaves on the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010) dan Leonard Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975).
  - 5 Malikussaleh atau Malik As-Saleh adalah Sultan pertama dan pendiri kerajaan Samudera Pasai, yaitu kerajaan Islam pertama di Nusantara. Samudera Pasai didirikan tahun 1267, dan Malikussaleh wafat tahun 1297, yang bisa dilihat dari tanggal pada batu nisannya yang ditemukan di Aceh. Samudera Pasai akhirnya juga takluk di tangan Portugis tahun 1521, sepuluh tahun setelah takluknya Malaka. Agar lebih jelas, lihat M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1200*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2001).
  - 6 see Ahmad A. Darban (2010). "Ulama Jawa dalam Perspektif Sejarah" dalam *Jurnal Humaniora*, Vol. 16, No. 1, th.2010, pp. 27-34.
  - 7 Raja Gowa XIV, I Mangarangi Daeng Manrabbia, adalah Raja Gowa pertama yang masuk Islam tahun 1605 setelah mendapat ajaran Islam dari Datuk ri Bandang, kemudian mengganti namanya menjadi "Sultan Awaluddin", yang diadopsi oleh dialek lokal menjadi "Sultan Alauddin".
  - 8 see Natasha Stacey, *Boats ...*, *op.cit.* p. 24.
  - 9 see La Marihi, *Kepemimpinan Kepala Madrasah Tsanawiyah Mantigola dalam Membina Hubungan Sekolah Dengan Masyarakat Bajo*, (Kendari: Universitas Haluoleo, 2007) dan F.R. Zacot, *Orang Bajo, Suku Pengembara Laut*, (Jakarta: Gramedia-EFEO-FJP, 2008).
  - 10 David Sopher, *The Sea Nomads*, (Singapore: Memoirs of the National Museum of Singapore, 1977).
  - 11 La Marihi, *Kepemimpinan ...*, *op.cit.*
  - 12 Dikutip dari Uniawati, *Fungsi Mantra Melaut pada Masyarakat Suku Bajo di Sulawesi Tenggara*. (Kendari: Kantor Bahasa Provinsi Sulawesi Tenggara, 2006).

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