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BUWAS KUNING: A SYMBOL OF INTEGRATION IN SAMA-BAJAU RITUALS

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Abstract

Rice is not just a staple food among the Sama-Bajau. It also has an important role as a ritual paraphernalia in the performance of several religious ceremonies such as *magomboh*, *magpaii-bahau*, *magduwata*, *magkoktaun*, *pitobotangan* and *kanduli*. In the ceremonies, rice is deliberately coloured with turmeric and is called *buwas kuning*. It is prepared according to time-honoured rituals and traditional prescriptions, and handed down from one generation to the next, from dehusking of the paddy to the prepared meal when it is served to the participants. Each process of the preparation is ritualized to signify the continuing links between the living and the dead, which means ancestors and spirits inhabit the spiritual world. Through the preparation and serving of *buwas kuning*, the participants pay homage to elders, ancestors, and the spirits. This homage is essential to maintain the balance between the living and the spiritual world. Thus, it serves as a ritual tool of linking and integrating the two worlds. At the same time, the communal activities involved in the preparation also have a latent social function—it brings family members together which further integrates the local Sama-Bajau in the event. Such social gatherings have also become non-religious, developing into a cultural event that enables families and members of the community to participate as a social and secular obligation, in addition to affirming their identity with the group.

Introduction

For Victor Turner (1957), a ritual is a social drama which entails four dimensions such as breach, crisis, redressive actions and reintegration. The participating community in the ritual gets together to achieve a common goal known as *communitas*, which gives a sense of integration. A ritual and offerings in the rituals have manifestations and latent functions. Robert Merton introduces the distinction between manifest and latent functions to distinguish between “conscious motivations for social behaviour, and its objective consequences” or, as he puts it elsewhere, observable objective consequences from subjective dispositions (Helm, 1971, p. 51). For Merton, “activity may have more than one function and one or more of its functions may be unintended or at least not obvious to those who practice it... The manifest function of a pattern of behaviour is the effect or result that is apparent to the members of the society. We can ask people why they do certain things; they will give the reason the manifest function of that behavior—the agreed upon valued action, the ideal as opposed to the real” (Society and Culture, 2008). “Manifest functions are those that are intended, and latent functions are those that are not” (Margulies, 2004). Special rice among Sama-Bajau community called *buwas kuning* serves an important role as ritual paraphernalia, which has both manifest and latent functions. This article will use the concept of manifest and latent functions introduced by Robert Merton and will discover the manifest and latent functions of *buwas kuning* in Sama-Bajau community living in Semporna, Malaysia.