

When Tradition Meets Modernity: The Adaptation of Bajau Community in Malaysia Amidst Sociocultural Transformation

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze how the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village, Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, adapts their traditional practices in response to modernization. Modernization has brought significant changes in various aspects of life, including local culture and traditions. The Bajau community, having lived with local wisdom and distinctive traditions, now faces significant pressure to integrate with the ever-evolving modern world. This study utilizes a qualitative approach, collecting data through in-depth interviews with members of the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village. Participatory observation is also conducted to understand how traditional practices interact with modern elements in daily life. The collected data are then analyzed to identify patterns and key findings related to traditional adaptation in the face of modernization. The research results indicate that the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village is experiencing changes in their traditional practices in response to modernization. They face a dilemma between preserving their cultural identity and adapting to the social and economic changes brought by modernization. Factors such as education, urbanization, and media influence also affect this adaptation process. Resource limitations and challenges in maintaining local wisdom pose obstacles for the Bajau community. Nevertheless, efforts to preserve traditions and cultural values are continually made by some Bajau community groups. This research provides a deeper understanding of how the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village adapts their traditional practices in the face of modernization. The results can make a significant contribution to efforts to preserve local culture and traditions amidst rapid social change. Recommendations for further research include expanding the scope of the study to Bajau communities in other regions and deepening the analysis of modernization's impact on their cultural aspects.

Keywords: Adaptation; Bajau community; Modernization; Traditional practices; Urbanization.

Introduction

Research on the cultural adaptation of traditional communities in the face of modernization holds significant value in the social context. The Bajau community in Kulumbai Village, Sabah, exemplifies how traditional life confronts the challenges and changes brought about by modernization. According to Hendry (2017), the social and cultural changes resulting from modernization often have a significant impact on traditional societies. The ability of these communities to adapt to such changes frequently becomes a determining factor in the preservation of their culture and identity.

Various studies have been conducted on the adaptation of traditional societies to modernization, and the results of these studies can generally be grouped into three main categories. The first pertains to changes in social and economic structures. This group explains how modernization has a significant impact on the social and economic structures of traditional societies. For instance, a study by Kashyap (2004) shows that modernization has altered the work patterns and economic life of indigenous communities in India, leading to significant social changes in the family structure, functions, roles,

relationships, and status of its members. These changes have also affected their relationship with the kinship system. In response, the study formulated implications for counseling interventions aimed at meeting the changing needs of contemporary Indian families.

The second category of research pertains to changes in Culture and Traditions as a result of modernization. Modernization also has a significant impact on the culture and traditions of traditional societies. Busro and Qodim (2018) reported that in Cirebon, birth traditions have evolved over time in response to the influence of modernization and social changes. Another research highlights the increase in energy consumption, productivity, employment structure, and community participation in mass media, without abandoning the Chinese cultural identity. The relevance and challenges of maintaining this culture have been widely discussed in forums and seminars, attended by cultural experts to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of Chinese traditions in the context of modernization (Siu-lun, 1986; Xingwu, 1991).

The last category is Resistance and Cultural Preservation. Despite the changes, many studies also illustrate how traditional societies strive to maintain and preserve their culture and identity. Research by Qodim (2017) explores how the Agama Djawa Sunda (ADS) community has managed to uphold and preserve their beliefs and identities in the era of modernization, despite facing prohibitions from the state and discrimination from majority groups, through strategies such as adjusting to official religions, readjusting based on 'safe' situations, and transforming identity from religious beliefs to customs.

Although these studies have provided in-depth insights into the adaptation of traditional societies in the face of modernization, there is still a knowledge gap regarding how the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village, Sabah, adapts their traditional practices in response to modernization. Therefore, this study aims to fill that knowledge gap.

The purpose of this research is to analyze how the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village, Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, adapts their traditional practices in the face of modernization challenges. In this context, modernization is defined as a series of social and economic changes that potentially alter the lifestyle, traditions, and culture of the Bajau community. Through a qualitative approach that includes in-depth interviews and participatory observations, this study aims to understand how the Bajau community maintains their cultural identity while adapting to the ever-changing modern world.

The benefits and contributions of this research include enhancing the understanding of the cultural adaptation process in the context of modernization. The results of this study can assist in formulating strategies and policies that promote the preservation of local cultures and traditions in the face of social and economic changes. Furthermore, these findings can provide valuable insights for the Bajau community and other indigenous communities who are striving to maintain and preserve their cultural identity and heritage in the modern era.

Research Method

The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach. According to Creswell (2013), the qualitative approach is used to explore and understand the meaning given by individuals or groups to a social or human problem. It allows researchers to obtain an in-depth and detailed picture of the phenomenon under study. For data collection, this study uses in-depth interview techniques and participatory observation. In-depth interviews are considered an effective method in exploring individual experiences and perceptions of their realities (Seidman, 2006).

Participatory observation is used as an additional method to understand how the

Bajau community in Kulambai Village interacts with modern elements in their daily lives. The use of participatory observation allows the researcher to be in the field, observing and participating in the daily lives of the research subjects (Kawulich, 2005). This provides the researcher with the opportunity to see directly how changes and adaptations occur in the context of the daily life of the Bajau community. The data obtained from the interviews and observations are then analyzed using content analysis to identify patterns and key findings (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Results and Discussion

1. Overview of the Bajau Community in Kulambai Village

In this section, we present an overview of the Bajau community residing in Kulambai Village, Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia. The Bajau community is an indigenous ethnic group with a rich history and distinct culture. They are renowned for their seafaring skills, particularly in fishing, and for living in traditional stilt houses. The social structure of the Bajau community is still influenced by traditional kinship systems and hierarchies (Hussin & Khoso, 2017; Musa, Fozi, & Mohd, 2020; Stacey, Steenbergen, Clifton, & Acciaioli, 2018). The lives of the Bajau community in Kulambai Village revolve closely around the sea, with fishing, hunting, and gathering marine resources being their primary livelihoods (Osman, Yassin, Gabir, & Bakrin, 2021).

The Bajau community in Kulambai Village primarily speaks the Bajau Sama language (Mawi & Jusilin, 2017), although the majority of them are also proficient in Malay and English due to external influences (Stacey et al., 2018). Religion holds significant importance in the lives of the Bajau community, as the entire population in this village practices Islam. The daily lives of the Bajau community in this village revolve around the norms and values of their Islamic faith. To ensure the religious education of the younger generation, religious schools have been established in the village. In addition to formal and religious schools, non-formal education is also conducted, such as religious study sessions held in the mosque, led by trusted religious teachers and imams.



Figure 1 Village's oldest mosque

The oldest mosque in Kulambai Village, as shown in Figure 1, is meticulously maintained by periodically repainting and maintaining its internal structure. This mosque has been standing since before the Japanese colonial era in the Kota Belud area and

Kulambai Village. It serves as a place for religious study sessions, Quran recitation, religious schooling for children, and other religious teachings. Worship ceremonies, such as the "migang" ceremony, a gratitude ceremony marking the arrival of the holy month of Ramadan and the start of fasting for all villagers, are also conducted in this mosque. The migang ceremony is a longstanding cultural tradition that has been passed down through generations. During the migang ceremony, each household brings food to be shared among the participants, and a leader leads the recitation of tahlil and other prayers until the conclusion of the ceremony.

Abundant natural resources, such as the sea and forests, play an integral role in the Bajau community's way of life (Abu Bakar, 2020). Oral traditions, including traditional songs and folktales, hold significant importance in preserving their cultural identity (Zakharov, 2021). However, modernization and technological advancements pose significant challenges to the Bajau community in Kulambai Village, leading to changes that impact their way of life and cultural values.

2. Changes in Culture and Tradition due to Modernization

The influx of external culture and the shift from traditional to modern practices have significantly impacted the Bajau community's culture in Kulambai Village. The rejection of negative foreign influences on Bajau traditions can be observed in the phenomenon of marriage in the village. Previously, wedding ceremonies were celebrated with joy and followed traditional customs regarding food and respectful activities. However, currently, the influence of external culture has introduced the consumption of alcoholic beverages, especially among teenagers, which was previously non-existent. An interview with a resident of Kulambai Village, Azwee, confirms that this phenomenon has created negative perceptions of the village and religion, tarnishing the previously well-preserved positive image (Azwee, Personal Communication, Kupang, July 28, 2015).

In addition, gambling culture is also spreading among the community in Kulambai Village, which has a negative impact on the village's image, particularly in the eyes of visiting outsiders. The changing times have also diminished the practice of pure traditional characteristics such as playing traditional Bajau musical instruments and singing traditional songs. The younger generation lacks understanding and knowledge of many Bajau customs and cultural roots, such as the 'mulud' ceremony (Bajau poetry) and 'ngalai' (healing ritual for the sick), which were previously integral parts of village life. Interviews with residents of Kulambai Village also indicate that many traditional ceremonies have been forgotten, and this is one of the negative consequences of cultural change towards modernization (Azwee, Personal Communication, Kupang, July 28, 2015).

The negative impact of external culture is also evident in the Bajau language. The Bajau language, which used to be preserved with the use of original words, is now often mixed with other languages, such as Malay. This reflects the increasing influence of external culture, which poses a threat to the preservation of the Bajau tribe's native language and diminishes their cultural identity. Furthermore, the culture of dressing has also been influenced by the changing times. Some community members in the village choose to dress according to modern trends, which is sometimes perceived as immodest by the traditional society. The foreign dressing culture adopted by the villagers is another example of the negative impact of external culture on Bajau traditions in Kulambai Village.

3. Factors Affecting Traditional Adaptation

The process of traditional adaptation among the Bajau community in Kulambai Village is influenced by various interacting factors. Interviews with several members of the Bajau community revealed the main factors that influence changes in their traditional practices. One significant factor is education. With an increasing number of Bajau children attending school, opportunities are opened for them to access knowledge and information from the outside, which in turn can influence their perspectives and traditional values (Carneiro, 2000).

The influence of mass media and technology is also a significant factor in the traditional adaptation of the Bajau community. Observations indicate that access to television, the internet, and social media has opened up exposure to cultures and lifestyles from the outside, which can alter the preferences and behavior patterns of the Bajau community. This aligns with previous research stating that mass media plays a significant role in shaping opinions and cultural identities (Stevenson, 2020; Wasserman, 2005).

Furthermore, urbanization and the development of nearby cities also influence the traditional adaptation of the Bajau community. Many community members have migrated to cities in search of better employment and economic opportunities. As a result, their relationship with tradition and village life has changed. This process of urbanization can lead to changes in cultural values and more locally specific traditional practices (Colozza & Avendano, 2019).

However, it is important to recognize that despite the external factors that influence traditional adaptation, the Bajau community's desire to preserve their cultural identity also plays a vital role in this process. A quote from an interview with a Bajau elder, Ahmad (Personal Communication, July 28, 2015), captures his perspective: "Adaptation is a part of life, but we must also remember where we come from and who we are. We value modernization, but we also want to maintain the legacy of our ancestors. It is a part of our identity and what we bequeath to the next generation."

4. Forms of Efforts in Maintaining Tradition

In their endeavor to preserve cultural heritage and traditions in Kulambai Village, the Bajau community has adopted various endeavors that center around the conservation and advancement of their cultural legacy. One such effort involves embracing traditional lifestyles, such as participating in communal mosque cleaning and upholding the tradition of 'nitik gandang' to honor the presence of the assembly in the mosque. Furthermore, educating the younger generation about Bajau customs and culture plays a pivotal role in safeguarding traditional knowledge. The youth are imparted with training and education on customs through communal gatherings and traditional competitions.

The use of the Bajau language is also actively promoted to ensure that their native language is not forgotten, as language is a key element of a nation's identity. The community of Kulambai Village also organizes various competitions that highlight the village's customs, such as grave poetry competitions, ngisi kalas (filling the water jar) competitions, and mulud (celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday) competitions. These competitions are held as a means of preserving and honoring the traditional customs they possess.

Furthermore, sillaturrahmi or social visits among villagers are also an important part of maintaining relationships and strengthening kinship among them. When there are kenduri (festive ceremonies) or other special events, the community visits and informs each other about the purpose of the event, as a way to enhance social connections and neighborly relations. All these efforts are aimed at preserving the local cultural values that

are inherent in the identity of Kulambai Village.

Collectively, these endeavors are crucial in ensuring that the valuable traditions of the Bajau people remain alive and are passed down from generation to generation. By practicing these forms of cultural preservation, the community of Kulambai Village is committed to preserving and appreciating their cultural heritage, allowing the identity and cultural wisdom of the Bajau people to thrive and endure in the face of ongoing modernization and social change.

5. Challenges and Opportunities in Tradition Preservation

In their efforts to preserve traditions, communities face challenges and risks, particularly for those who value their cultural wisdom. One factor that fuels the desire to maintain traditions is the change or loss of traditional characteristics in one's life, especially when individuals are influenced by modern culture, such as fashion, social relationships, and behaviors that are more Westernized.

The community in Kulambai Village, including the Bajau community, also faces challenges in preserving their traditions. One major challenge is the occurrence of negative interactions among fellow villagers. Some members of the community are reluctant to discuss traditions and tend to embrace new cultures that enter their lives, especially with technological advancements that make them feel less reliant on social interactions. This results in the loss of collective spirit and difficulties in gathering the community together.

In addition, the negative effects of globalization also contribute to conflicts among the different ethnic groups in the village. The influence of external lifestyles entering the community can trigger social jealousy and dissatisfaction, potentially leading to conflicts among residents. Among the various challenges faced, the issue of Westernization is also dominant in the community of Kulambai Village. Some individuals choose to live in a more modern way and disregard traditional values for various reasons, such as difficulties in accessing transportation and a lifestyle that prioritizes personal needs without considering the surrounding environment.

All of these challenges raise concerns among some members of the community in Kulambai Village, as they fear the risk of losing cultural values and the erosion of cultural diversity. The strengthening influence of Westernization makes it difficult to foster collective awareness within the community. These issues are of serious concern in the efforts to preserve and maintain the deeply-rooted traditions in the Bajau community of Kulambai Village.

However, despite the challenges faced in preserving traditions, there are also various opportunities that can be utilized to safeguard their cultural wisdom. First, innovative approaches to tradition preservation can present attractive opportunities. The Bajau community can adopt creative and innovative methods to impart their cultural values to the younger generation. For example, the use of information technology and social media can serve as effective means to disseminate information about their traditions and local wisdom. By harnessing digital platforms, Bajau traditions can be preserved and introduced to a wider audience, ensuring that the younger generation remains interested and connected to their cultural heritage.

Secondly, collaboration with cultural institutions and non-governmental organizations can provide greater support in tradition preservation. The Bajau community can establish partnerships with cultural institutions and organizations that are dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage. With their assistance, the community can organize

educational programs and cultural activities that involve active participation from community members, especially the younger generation. This collaboration can also help raise community awareness about the importance of preserving and nurturing their traditions.

Thirdly, strengthening local cultural identity can be key in tradition preservation. The Bajau community needs to understand and value the significance of their own cultural identity. By proudly upholding their identity as Bajau people, they can overcome the negative influences of modernization and globalization. The drive to preserve traditions will be stronger when the community feels that their traditions are an integral part of their identity and self-identity as Bajau.

By leveraging these opportunities, the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village can strive more diligently in preserving their traditions. Additionally, the active participation of all community members, including the younger generation, in safeguarding and nurturing their cultural heritage will be the key to success in preserving the continuity of Bajau traditions amidst the ongoing tide of modernization.

Conclusion

In this study, the researchers successfully analyzed how the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village, Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, adapted their traditional practices in response to modernization. The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the changes experienced by the Bajau community in their efforts to preserve their cultural identity while integrating with the evolving modern world. The research results indicate that modernization has influenced various aspects of the Bajau community's lives, including their traditional practices. The adaptation process is influenced by factors such as education, urbanization, and the influence of mass media. Despite the challenges in preserving local wisdom, certain groups within the Bajau community continue to strive for the preservation of their traditions and cultural values. This research offers important insights into how the Bajau community confronts cultural changes in the face of modernization. In the context of cultural preservation and the safeguarding of traditional values, it is crucial for the government and other stakeholders to consider appropriate measures to protect this cultural heritage while allowing for sustainable social development. This study also contributes to the academic literature and is expected to stimulate further research on the impact of modernization on the Bajau community and other ethnic groups in the region.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, the research focuses solely on the Bajau community in Kulumbai Village, Kota Belud, Sabah, Malaysia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other Bajau communities or ethnic groups. Secondly, the qualitative approach employed in this study relies on a small sample size and may not capture the full range of perspectives within the community. Additionally, the research primarily relies on self-reported data from interviews and participatory observations, which may be subject to biases or inaccuracies. Furthermore, the study does not extensively explore the specific economic and social changes brought about by modernization in relation to the Bajau community. Future research should consider expanding the scope to include a more diverse range of Bajau communities and conducting quantitative analyses to complement the qualitative findings.

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