


Buwas Kuning (Yellow Rice) and its Symbolic Functions Among the Sama-Bajau of Malaysia

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Abstract

This article is based on ethnographic data and presents and expands on the symbolic functions of *buwas kuning* (yellow rice) being prepared and offered by the Sama-Bajau communities in their ritual performances in Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia. The findings show that the practice of offering *buwas kuning* (as an integral part of the main rituals, such as *pag-omboh*) has symbolic latent (unintended and unrecognized) psychological and social consequences on the Sama-Bajau villagers. The community knows that among the functions of *buwas kuning* are that it spreads fear and risk; creates a link between the physical and spiritual worlds; protects families from curses (sickness, disasters, spirit possessions); maintains the ritual's authenticity and originality (which satisfies the ancestors and related spirits); causes participation of the community members, especially women; and engenders community support. The latent (yet to some extent known to some community members) functions of the offering of *buwas kuning* enable the community to check families' material wealth and integrate the community with its identity. It teaches members to go (or live) through a process of patience (indispensable in rough sea life; also in the dangerous geographic region) and the material gains, as well as the social status enjoyed by the mediums. However, many villagers have some understanding of the latent functions of *buwas kuning*'s latent consequences. Although many people know about these functions, it is the degree of knowledge about these latent functions that is of interest, as this knowing is meaningful for the survival of ritual practices such as *buwas kuning*.

Keywords

Buwas kuning, Sama-Bajau, Semporna-Sabah, Malaysia, symbolic functions

Introduction

This article focuses on a little known but important part of the rituals that are practiced among the Sama-Bajau nomadic groups living in eastern Indonesia; the eastern part of Sabah (Borneo in Malaysia) to the southern Philippines (see Figures 1 and 2). The elements (or part) include *buwas* (rice) *kuning* (yellow) prepared for regular and annual rituals (i.e., *mag-omboh* or *magpaii-bahau*—the annual harvest ritual and *mag-paigal jinn*—removing the spirit from the human body) to offer ancestral spirits and *jinn* (they are mediums). The preparation of *buwas kuning* takes place in a ritualistic manner in the form of an offering. In Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, rice is cooked yellow (Pugh-Kitingan, Hussin, & Baptist, 2005; Sillander, 2006). Rice offerings are common to many Austronesian communities but in different ways (Baldick, 2013; Headley, 2004). Among the Sama-Bajau, *buwas kuning* is yellow rice because turmeric (*dulaw*) powder is added. It has religious and social significance and is considered central to the ritual's performance. Among the Sama-Bajau, the preparation and offering

of *buwas kuning* is a single element (besides other food offerings) within the annual ritual *mag-omboh*.

Although there are no historical accounts to suggest that *buwas kuning* only belonged to the Sama-Bajau communities in the Malay Archipelago, the community members claim that *buwas kuning* has been used in their ritual performances for many generations. Also, the term *buwas kuning* does not appear elsewhere in the literature. Various scholars, including Nimmo (2001), Bottignolo (1995), and Abels (2012), who worked among the Sama-Bajau communities (in Malaysia and Indonesia), have mentioned that the communities offer different kinds of rice or food made of rice in rituals, but, they did not term it as *buwas kuning* or independently

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