

## **Analysis of the Bajau People's Local Genius as the Catalyst for Empowering Community in the Perspective of Cultural Studies**

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The Bajau people have several local geniuses which have been parts of their socio-political, cultural, economic and legal life order. In addition, they have also become parts of their environmental management. Their local geniuses, which are highly wide and cover theological, pragmatic and technical things, are dynamic and sustainable and can be accepted by their community. In practice, their local geniuses are potentially used as the cultural capital for empowering the community. Two of such local geniuses are in the forms of a social network system and indigenous knowledge. They may be used as the catalyst for empowering the community and forming cultural resistance to globalization. In addition, they are also highly important to the Bajau community, as they have creatively inspired the people to reply to various life pressures resulting from economic problems and the fact that their daily needs are becoming more complex.

Keywords: Local genius, Bajau people and cultural preservation

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The coastal area of Southeast Sulawesi is occupied by different ethnic groups, one of which is the Bajau ethnic group. It is currently predicted that there are 350,000 Bajau people living in the coastal area of Southeast Sulawesi. Most of them are traditional farmers and are poor (Alimaturahim, 1991: 5; Anwar, 2007: 25). The pattern of their coastal residence has also been responsible for their poverty. Their pattern of residence can be categorized into three; they are 1) on the boat; they use their boats as their main residences, except when it is windy and the waves are rough, they build huts along the coastal area; 2) on the sea; they build houses on stilts whose pillars are erected in the bottom of the sea; and 3) in the main land and isolated islands (Zen, 1993: 75; Tuchman, 1994: 9).

Kazufumi (1997: 7) states that the Bajau people frequently move from one place to another. As a consequence, the local government and the people living in the main land call them the sea people or the boat people. In addition, it is frequently stated that they are wild, rough, hard and introverted as those to whom they associate are selected. As far as how they associate with others or communicate

with those who are outside their social system, they seem to be isolated as most of them occupy the areas which are relatively far from the areas where the other communities live. Apart from that, they have two cultural symbols; those coming from outside their social system called *bagai* (others), and those coming from their social system or those who belong to the Bajau ethnic group called *samma* (brothers), which are also responsible for their becoming isolated.

Such characteristics and culture attached to the Bajau people should be understood from their own perspective based on the relics of maritime culture they have. From the emic point of view, the cultural symbols *bagai* and *samma* do not symbolize that they are exclusive and introverted but reflect their internal solidarity based on the feeling that they share trials and tribulations as they are a group of people who are spiritually and physically threatened by the hard and challenging maritime life. It is this principle which has strengthened their characteristics as the Bajau people who are always brave to cross the ocean which they claim to be their garden and compound.

The Bajau people are quieter or less communicative than the other ethnic groups. Such an attitude is the essence of their past experience and the results of what they learn and of their interaction with the nature. The maritime environment has taught them to talk when necessary but to think and act a lot. Such a habit is usually seen in the tradition of *ngerempah* (fish encirclement) or when they catch fish. The *ngerempah* should be done when the situation is quiet and not noisy verbally so that the fish will not become frightened and leave the location where the *ngerempah* takes place.

It is such a situation which makes everybody involved in the *ngerempah* activity careful when talking and doing their activities. The Bajou ethnic people regard that what is provided by the nature (the maritime environment) is an educational process. They have learned to work more and talk less, and to think about the strategies which may be used to control the sea which is full of challenges and endangers their souls. Nahdi (1998: 74) states that their exclusive attitude, as a minority group, positively affects their language aspects. Linguistically, their isolative and protective attitude has caused their language to be unique, preserved and sustainable. Such a maritime ideology has always been attached to the souls and enthusiasm of the Bajau people living in Southeast Sulawesi, although they reside on the sea (sea sedenter) and regard that the maritime yields are their sources of livelihood (Basri, 2003: 13).

Although the Bajau ethnic people have resided permanently by using the sea their residence, they are still poor and powerless. Generally, they do not have adequate fishing and social facilities and infrastructure. In addition, their human resource quality is low, their access to capital and to the market of local economic products is limited, and there is no socio-economic institution which can be used as their developmental instrument. Apart from that, they are always the victims of the creditors who work under the guise of cooperatives. Therefore, it is no exaggeration if Basri (2009) states in the results of his research that the Bajau people need to be socially, culturally and economically empowered for two reasons. The first reason is that socio-economically and culturally, they are less developed compared to those living in the main land. The

second reason is that they are always cheated by other people such as the middlemen who fool with fish price, and the cooperative which gives them loans with high interests.

The Bajau people are always socio-economically powerless. However, essentially, they still have a capital which may be used as a new resource for improving their standard of living. In this case, the capital refers to the local geniuses they have which can be culturally, economically and socially used as the catalyst for empowering them. They have a number of local geniuses inherited from their ancestors from generation to generation or knowledge acquired from the interaction between them and the nature (the sea). The values of local geniuses constitute their cultural elements which are sustainable and immune to the changes taking place in their life order. At the same time, they also control and direct their culture.

As an expression and an entry point, it is understood that the Bajau people have a number of local geniuses which are highly valuable. It can be observed from their philosophy stating that "*Papu manang'ita lino bake isi-isina, kita naja manusiana mamikiria bhatigga kolena mangelolana*", which can be freely translated into: God has provided the earth with everything it contains; we are left to think about how to manage it well and wisely. In their opinion, it means that the Bajau people will never suffer from hunger or poverty as the sea, which is limitless with all its potentials and natural resources, is the source of their lives, garden and compound. In exploring the natural resources, they refer to four principles; they are *self-introspection, self-control, self-esteem, and self-confident*.

The Bajau people, who are traditional fishermen, recognize that the natural resources made available by the sea are limited and will be finished one day. Therefore, they are careful in managing the maritime resources. The ethics they refer to when managing the maritime resources is that they should eat before they are hungry and stop eating before they are full. What is meant is that they may not collect the maritime yields greedily. They may not collect the maritime yields so exaggeratedly that they have to damage environment. They may not catch fish and collect other maritime yields exaggeratedly; they



may catch fish as needed by their families. They also strongly refer to the religious teaching inherited from their ancestors that *Papu* will not change their fate. They will change their fate by themselves.

What has been inherited by their ancestors as to how to manage the sea, which they believe, is highly legitimated. They recognize that it is necessary to be aware that they have to maximize the potentials the individuals have for the reason that that is the only way in which they are able to develop and make use of their environmental and socio-cultural potentials. As far as practical skills are concerned, they also have a number of skills as to how to process fish after being caught. They are skillful in drying fish by using salt, fumigation, and preservation called '*pemindangan*'. The dried fish is usually stored for consumption during what is called *musim paceklik* (a period of time when it is moony, windy and wavy and fish is scarce). In addition, they are also skilful in making *terasi* (condiment made from pounded and fermented shrimp or small fish). In addition, they are also good at weaving baskets and the like. Apart from that, the mothers are also good at making cakes from maritime yields such as sea weed.

The subsistent economic system strongly attached to the Bajau life has created the ethics of subsistence, as the consequence of their response to poverty and underdevelopment. It is here that the Bajau people have created the background of their ethics of subsistence based on the safety first principle; safety is given priority and risks are reduced. The actualization of such ethics is that they have diversified their professions; they have established a pattern of cooperation named *rarambanga* (the Bajau people's social network), through which they help each other in all aspects of life, both related to the production process or the exploitation of maritime resources and to the social activities involving the network of families, friends, and neighbors. Such a social network is established based on the following principles; they are the principles of *sikaada* (accepting one another's condition), *sippatapa* (trusting each other), and *situlutulu* (helping each other).

What was described above shows that the Bajau community has a number of local geniuses kept in their socio-cultural system, which are potentially analyzed and used for the catalyst for empowering the past cultural heritage-based community.

### THE URGENCY OF REVEALING THE BAJAU PEOPLE'S LOCAL GENIUS IN THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Human life is full of signs whose meanings should be unfolded and interpreted through the process of deconstruction. However, the process of deconstruction should be initiated from the process of demystification, as, as stated by Derrida, the meanings of signs cannot be purely established for the reason that all signs always contain other articulations (Norris, 2003).

Such signs should be deconstructed by continuously reversing the binary opposition hierarchy and entrusting the language as the field. As a result, what used to be the center, the foundation, and the principle are not the center, the foundation, and the principle any longer. Such a reversing strategy is done temporarily and is made to be permanently imbalanced so that it can be continued limitlessly. Deconstruction opens widely the meaning of signs so that their meanings and ideologies will flow continuously.

Following what is proposed by Derrida, treating the past as a text containing a number of meanings will lead us to an understanding that the past is not an *ansich* historical epoch which is already over without meaning. The past recorded many things related to human life which can be reconstructed and oriented for the future life. As stated by Derrida that among the signs in the past which can be deconstructed are the essence of the socio-cultural system which collectively belongs to a community created through its life experience and habit. According to Ardika (2007), the essence of socio-cultural system is called a local genius.

The local genius, as a cultural product of the past, has the role to organize, supervise and direct its supporting community so that social order will be created for human life in the universe. According to Astra (2004), in Ardika (2004: 113), the local genius is flexible and immune to facing external influences and can settle societal problems. Therefore, it is necessary to revitalize or to make use of the local genius of a community by unfolding, criticizing, formulating and planning accurately so that it can function properly and optimally. In the perspective of Giddens (2003: 192), the traditional values or the

local genius of a community should be proportionally created.

Generally, the local genius, as the cultural heritage of the past, is unfolded to search out and finally, if desired, to determine it as the state identity which might have lost as a consequence of the acculturation and transformational processes which have taken place, is taking place and will take place as something which cannot be avoided. To us, the attempt made to find out the new state identity based on the local genius is essential to unify the state culture based on the local identities. In short, the end of the situation of cultural awareness wished to be achieved is not *necrophily*, namely, the situation, as stated by Fromm (1986), in which there is a feeling of loving everything which is material and inanimate, but *biophily*, the situation in which there is a feeling of loving everything which is meaningful and animate.

Hence, following what is proposed by Barthes (in Hoed, 2008: 41), the attempt made to make use of and develop the Bajau people's local genius means cultural preservation. In this way, after being unheard and almost getting extinct, it can be revitalized gradually. Actually, such an attempt may also inspire the Bajau people to be aware that they already have the local genius which can be potentially developed into one which characterize their identity as an ethnic group which has maritime culture, as the other ethnic groups in the archipelago.

The development of the local genius which is contextually relevant is meaningful to the Bajau people's development, if seen from the cultural sustainability. In addition, it is also useful to their identity as well. Many ethnic groups use their local values to creatively inspire their being proud of their culture and, at the same time, of their region as having played a role contributing to the state culture. The cultural art works, which are unfolded from the local sources, if shown in the Indonesian discourse, always greatly contributes to the creation of a new identity of the state as a whole. It is that which is intended by Suastika (2006: 65) that understanding the state cultural values is essential as an attempt made by the Indonesian people as a whole.

The local genius also implies that it contains the past culture. This means that it also functions to

inspire the longing for the ancestor's life, which serves as the background of the current life. In this way, the situation of being aware of the culture and history establishing the state may grow. In addition, it is also the way in which the statement that the only current era is relevant can be avoided. It also serves as the bridge connecting the past and the current era, and the older generation and the future generation. Finally, it can also be used to fasten and unify generations.

Therefore, the past should inspire and motivate how to design and build a better future. Shils (in Sztompka, 2005: 65) states that the relation of human beings to their past never dies. In the event that a community is broken off with its past, it will never perfect or intact; its local tradition and culture will become distorted; and finally it will lose its identity. Or at least such a community will be caught in the situation called *disinherited-masses*; the situation in which it will get isolated from its reality of 'being', meaning that it will become another instead of "becoming itself". The reason is that tradition, among other things, is used to maintain self identity or self essence. Tradition allows human beings to maintain their self-essence; without tradition, human beings will get excluded from their civilization which always causes life to change (Rosyid, 2008: 3).

Following what is proposed by Sztompka (2003: 23) and Rosyid (2008: 3), the utilization of the Bajau people's local genius as the capital for empowering themselves is the manifestation of the fact that they are bound to their tradition. If analyzed from the perspective of semiotics (Hoed, 2008: 25), the revitalization of their local genius as one of the variants of their empowerment, as a local culture-based community, reflects one of the functions of tradition to form their collective identity which convinces and strengthens them as an ethnic group. According to Basri (2009), one of their collective identities is that they have what is called *rarambangah* which is established based on the principles of *situlu-tulu*, *tappa* and *sikaada*. Such principles have caused them to share trials and tribulations and to have close brotherhood. In addition, *rarambangah* has been one of the strategies used by the Bajau people to face various problems. It is that which is intended by Giddens (2003: 23) that every tradition is normatively and morally loaded



and constitutes the binding characteristics. The morality in tradition cannot be separated from the interpreting process; the past is connected with the current era. Tradition does not reflect what is really done by a community but what should be done.

Therefore, the local genius used as the medium for empowering the coastal people in general and the Bajau people in particular, is one of the attempts made to change tradition or traditional culture into something which is useful in life. The reason is that modernism tends to regard tradition as something which obstructs the progress made by a nation or community. Cassier (1990: 104) states that every human being, as a component of a community, has experience and habit since born. Meaningfully, such experience and habit form history that human beings should observe and treat the past as the teacher to the current era.

In another perspective, the life experience and habit of human beings or a community in the past constitute the foundation based on which regulations, knowledge, skills, matters pertaining to values and ethics regulating the community social order which keep surviving and developing from generation to generation are formed. The utilization of the Bajau people's local genius may also be understood as the implementation of values based on experience and knowledge logically acknowledged and considered good by the people. Such a value or local genius is already basically examined and is certainly positive as it is a social activity which is repeatedly reinforced.

Such local genius is made up of the values which are actually derived from the Bajau people's cultural values which have been in existence in various systems of their lives. It is basically regarded as the foundation on which their identity has been formed. It has also made their culture to have a foundation and to frequently function as the source referred to when new things are created such as those found in language, arts, technology and so forth, which are then shown in the real life.

#### **MEANING OF THE UTILIZATION OF THE BAJAU PEOPLE'S LOCAL GENIUS**

The utilization of the local genius as the empowerment medium means that the Bajau people

have made an attempt to preserve their tradition or traditional culture and to maintain the existence of such a tradition. The era development and the progress made by human beings in regard to their civilization which have entered the third millennium have damaged the traditional local genius marked by the changes taking place in social order, the decrease in human values, social poverty, the fact that the community has been getting more and more dependent, and the fact that human resources and environment have been becoming degraded. The facts that the local genius values have not been appreciated, that the values of the traditional local genius have not been acknowledged, and that the globalization process has penetrated the boundaries of the nations, and even the rural areas, have been responsible for that.

Tradition is needed to regenerate the collective and personal identities. Tradition which is inherited from generation to generation refers to the collective awareness of a community. As a habit and collective awareness, tradition constitutes a mechanism which accelerates the personal growth of the community members. It is also part of individual life to maintain and identify one's essence, and to maintain oneself in a group. Similarly, Rosyid (2008: 3) also states that tradition allows human beings to know, to get familiar with and to maintain their existence in such a way what it will be in harmony with their environment. Shils (Sztompka: 1995: 74) affirms that human beings are not able to survive without tradition, although they are frequently unsatisfied with their own tradition.

Tradition refers to every material thing and view which is derived from the past and is still appreciated up to now, which has not been damaged, and thrown away or forgotten. Moreover, it is still used by its supporting community. The use of the local genius *rarambanga* as the catalyst for empowering community has been part of the attempt made to maintain the Bajau people's cultural values which are derived from the past. Such a local genius has been adopted and continued up to now, although some changes or shifts have been taking place resulting from the capitalistic capital introduced to them. In addition, the change taking place in a culture cannot be avoided and culturally, it is a factor which has contributed to the change taking place in the Bajau people's culture.

Culture is regarded as the manifestation of individual or collective life which always changes the nature. The activities done by human beings need natural environment, and that is what is referred to as culture. Culture refers to human activities and the struggle of human beings as individuals or groups to determine their future. Culture refers to the activities which can be directed and planned (Peursen, 1976: 10-11). Therefore, ability, creativity and novelties are needed. Human beings will not allow themselves left in their old lives; they need to search out new ways causing them to be more human. Culture is planned in such a way that it will go to human beings and that humanization will be the framework referred to when formulating cultural strategies.

Sztompka (1995: 73) states that in the mondial era the traditional values and modern ones compete with one another, causing tradition to be something which is useful to its supporting community; otherwise, the indigenous tradition will be influenced or entirely eliminated by globalization. According to Giddens (2003: 8), the inability of the local people to equalize the globalization current which has penetrated them has caused them to leave their local culture.

The preservation of tradition, as a cultural heritage, does not mean that tradition should be maintained statically and purely. However, it should be made in existence and maintained dynamically; in addition, its new forms should be invented. This is in line with what is stated by Giddens (2003: 72) that maintaining tradition purely means affirming the state of being separated and particularity. Furthermore, he states that tradition should be created in such a way that a new pattern, which is useful and has bargaining values for the sake of its existence, will be invented. Therefore, the use of the Bajau people's local genius as a model for empowering them is one of the forms how their tradition is revitalized or reconstructed so that it will be functionally useful to them.

### CONCLUSIONS

The Bajau people are a community with maritime culture. They have a number of local geniuses which are potentially used as the cultural capital for empowering them. Their local geniuses are reflected from their social and cultural systems. Their local geniuses include their indigenous knowledge and

skills, the main elements of their social organization, and their patterns of relation and interrelation well established and coordinated in their community.

Such local geniuses are used as the cultural capital for improving their dignity and prestige through empowerment process. As far as the dynamism of the Bajau people's life is concerned, the local geniuses they have are effective and flexible to face the changes taking place quickly in various factors of their lives. Being immune to changes, the local geniuses they have play highly important roles in establishing their socio-cultural and economic relations. The Bajau people have created and developed their local geniuses by including various mechanisms and manners of behaving and acting in their relations to their human fellows, environment and God.

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