

The Symbolic Meaning of *Semah Laut* From Sea Tribe Panglong Communities in Bintan, Riau Islands

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Abstract. The *semah laut* ritual is a tradition of the Panglong Bintan Sea Tribe in Riau Islands, often performed en masse but sometimes by traditional leaders. The Sea Tribe views the universe as a medium that supports their lives. The ritual involves various symbolic offerings, such as yellow pulut which is the main symbol and is an offering to *Jerambang* (the highest Sea God), eggs for the sea coast guard god, *sirih pinang* and *sirih bakik* (betel nut various item) as requests for safety, green beans and cigarettes are offerings for the Sea God to be eaten by the seven Sea Gods, and banana leaves as the base for these offerings. The research aims to understand the meanings behind these symbols using a descriptive qualitative method and a symbolic interactionism perspective. Findings show that *Semah Laut* is a belief system that connects the sacred (transcendent) with natural sustainability, reflecting a symbiotic relationship between nature and the divine. This ritual upholds moral values and local wisdom, blending spiritual beliefs with environmental preservation. *Keywords:* *Semah Laut Ritual, Meaning, Symbols, Local Wisdom.*

1 Introduction

The people of the Panglong Sea Tribe, Bintan, Riau Islands currently generally work as fishermen and fish processors. This is inseparable from the area where they live, which de facto lives by the sea. Currently, the population in Panglong, Bintan, Riau Islands is 75 families. In the social order of the Sea Tribe community, there is one person who is appointed by the community as a whole to serve as "Tribal Chief". Currently, the Sea Tribe community is headed by a "Tribal Chief" named Mr. Tintin. Geographically, Panglong Village is located in Berakit Village, Teluk Sebong District, Bintan Regency, Riau Islands Province [1].

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The lives of the people of the Panglong Sea Tribe depend heavily on sea catch. In 2000, fish catches began to decline quite drastically. The catches of the marine tribe in Panglong, Berakit Village, which still relied on very simple technology [2]. Previously, it was able to produce fish catches in the range of 60-70 kg, but after coral damage occurred, the coral fish caught by Sea Tribe people was only around 10-20 kg. The declining economic condition of the Sea Tribe continued until 2005, because in the same year there was a change in policy from the Government regarding a strict prohibition on fishing using dynamite, bombs or other fishing gear that was not environmentally friendly. The process of restoring coral reef ecosystems takes a long time, as proven until now, the average income of the Sea Tribe community has not changed, ranging from IDR 60,000 to IDR 90,000 every day.

The Sea Tribe community has a ritual called the Semah Laut Ritual. The sea semah ritual is a ritual commonly carried out by the Panglong Bintan sea tribe community, Riau Islands. This ritual is usually carried out en masse (although it is possible that it is only carried out by traditional leaders). This ritual contains various moral values which are visible through the meaning of its implementation. Different from other coastal communities in Indonesia which also have sea alms rituals, the Panglong sea tribe community has its own characteristics, including ritual equipment and belief in the existence of the Sea God. The Semah Laut ritual is a local wisdom in protecting the sea and coral reefs. This ritual is still preserved in the Panglong Sea Tribe community of Bintan, Islands.

This article analyzes the Panglong sea tribe's belief in something that lives in the sea (believed to be the Sea God). Their beliefs about natural phenomena such as when they don't get fish when they go to sea or even when the fish catch is very abundant. Belief in nature turns out to produce a belief that has spiritual characteristics so that it eventually becomes a belief and becomes a tradition. The Panglong sea tribe people believe in something good from nature, so they have a spiritual perspective and ultimately become a belief and tradition.

2 Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive type of research. The data source was taken from the Sea Tribe community in Panglong Village, Bintan, Riau Islands. The technique of determining informants is carried out by the purposive sampling method, where informants are deliberately selected based on certain criteria. The research instruments used are in-depth interviews and observations. The data collection technique was carried out by obtaining primary and secondary data through in-depth interviews with selected informants and direct observation in the research area. Data analysis was carried out by collecting, compiling, summarizing and comparing data obtained from interviews and observations, then interpretation and thematic analysis were carried out to produce research findings.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Characteristics Of The Sea People Of Panglong Village

The Sea tribe ethnic group is a fairly large traditional community in the Riau Islands Province. Data from the Kajang Foundation (2021), there are 44 groups of Sea tribe in five districts/cities in the Riau Islands with a population of 12,800 people. A total of 30 groups are in Lingga Regency, dozens of groups in Batam City, four groups in Bintan Regency, the rest in Anambas and Karimun Regency [3]. In Bintan Regency, the Laut Tribe lives in Berakit Village, Air Kelubi Village, Numbing Village, Kawal Pantai Village and Mapur Village (Sebong Bay). In Panglong Village, Berakit Village, the number of Laut Tribe is 75 family

heads (KK), 40 families in Air Kelubi Village, dozens of families in Kawal Village and in Mabur there are several family heads [4].

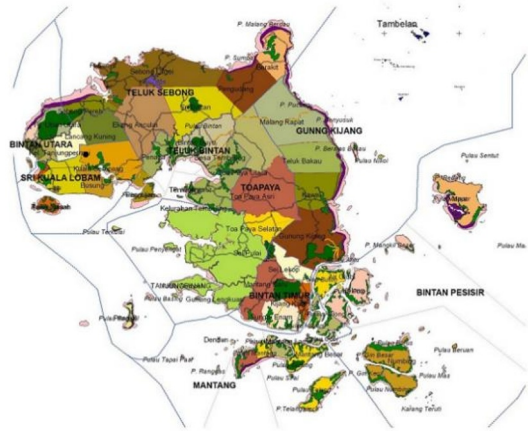


Fig. 1. Map of Kampung Panglong in Berakit Village, Bintan, Indonesia

One of the Sea Tribe Community groups that is considered advanced compared to other Sea tribe Community groups in the Riau Islands Province is the Sea tribe in Panglong Village, Berakit Village, Teluk Sebong District, Bintan Regency [5]. Panglong Village was made a tourist village by the Bintan Regency Government. The presence of the Sea tribe in the village is a cultural attraction. Panglong Village is not only a fishing village, but there are also remains of charcoal kitchens which testify to the existence of charcoal kitchen businesses in the area in the past. The Sea tribe community used to make their living working in charcoal kitchens, apart from sea products as fishermen.

The Sea tribe in Panglong Village, Berakit Village began to embrace religion after choosing to live on land. One of their reasons for settling in this area is related to marine resources which are a source of livelihood. The first landing of the Sea Tribe in this area began in 1962 by one family, Bone Pasius Boncet. They came from Kubung Island which is now part of Batam City. Three years later, three more families landed who later became the forerunners of the Sea Tribe community in Berakit Village. In 2010-2011, houses of worship began to be built in the area. Previously, they went to worship in another village. Catholics went to Pengudang Village and Muslims to another village in Berakit Village. Apart from embracing Catholicism and Islam, in this village there are also several people who choose to adhere to Protestantism [6].

The existence of a government program providing assistance in building houses for the Sea Tribe community in Panglong Village, Berakit Village, Bintan Regency, Riau Islands Province, has an indirect impact on the education of Sea Tribe children. The Sea Tribe community interacts with other residents, so that awareness arises for education. Moreover, the regional government of Bintan Regency also encouraged Sea Tribe children to also receive the same rights, namely nine years of basic education [7].

In general, the education level of the Sea Tribe community in Panglong Village is still low. Only one person has received a Diploma I (D1) college education in the name of Fransiskus Xaverius Tintin who is now the Chairman of the Kampung Panglong Sea Tribe. Many Sea Tribe children still drop out of school. There are several things that influence the low level of education of the Sea Tribe. Among them, the low motivation of parents to encourage their children to go to school. Since childhood, children have been taught to help

their parents in meeting household needs. Children are also used to earning their own money so they are lazy about pursuing education. The condition of education in Panglong Village which is still low is also due to limited funds and the fairly far distance to school.

The Sea Tribe community lives in Panglong Village in Berakit Village, which is located at the tip of Bintan Island. Panglong Village is not only inhabited by the Sea Tribe, but there are also Malays, Bugis and Chinese who have shops or stalls in the village. Inter-ethnic relations are going well. Likewise, fellow Sea Tribe people also live in harmony. There has never been any conflict due to ethnic or religious issues. Social interaction between the Sea Tribe community and other ethnic groups occurs in a number of places, such as markets, stalls, at the port, at sea when they are fishing together, including at busy events at the village level. Malay is a language generally used by the people of Kampung Panglong and is used as the language of daily communication. This ability to speak Malay makes it easier for Sea Tribe people to interact with people from outside their tribal group.

Social interaction between Sea tribe children in Panglong Village is going well, inseparable from the attitude of tolerance between ethnicities and religions that has existed for decades in Panglong Village. According to the Chairman of the Panglong Village Sea Tribe, Fransiskus Xaverius Tintin, no one should impose a religion that will disturb the peace of the village. Community leaders from the Laut Tribe of Kampung Panglong will expel anyone who is deemed to be disturbing the harmonious condition of their village. Differences in political issues, differences in religion, ethnicity or economic conditions will not disturb the peaceful life of Panglong Village. Catholics worship in a church named after Bone Pasius, Tintin's parents. Meanwhile, the mosque in Panglong Village became the house of worship for Francis Xavier Tintin's Muslim uncle and family. Even though Panglong Village has become a tourist village and the Sea tribe are used to mingling with other ethnic groups in Berakit Village, there are still traditions that the Sea tribe keep.



Fig. 2. Lago and Mat Beyeng, Panglong Sea tribe community



Fig. 3. Two Children From The Panglong Beach Sea Tribe Boarded A Canoe And Went Ashore
(Source: Author Team Documentation (2024)).



Fig. 4. Tintin, Chairman of the Panglong Village Sea Tribe (Source: Author Team Documentation (2024))

3.2 Semah Laut Ritual: Life Cycle Ritual Theory

In general, the Semah Laut Ritual in the Panglong Sea Tribe community is the release of offerings addressed to the Sea God carried out individually or by several people. The offerings include trays and pandanus; betel nut; yellow bamboo; mung beans; rice and cigarettes/tobacco. The purpose of carrying out the semah laut ritual is as a form of gratitude for the good fortune obtained from catching quite a lot of fish; ask for the grace of life and good fortune and ask for the grace of forgiveness for the bad actions that have been committed.

This ritual is relevant to Van Genenep's theory of life cycle rituals [8]. Van Gennep stated that every phase of a person's life cycle is important. Theoretically, Van Gennep (in Nurdin, 2017) explains that:

“Thus, although a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition) and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated...” (Van Gennep (1960) in Nurdin, 2017.

Based on this theory, it can be understood that although every indigenous community has a life cycle ritual or ceremony, not all parts have the same level of importance. This depends on the customs and traditions of each community. Each indigenous community has its own culture, and it is these traditions that determine which parts are most important in each phase of life. So there is one ritual that is more important than other rituals in one society, but not for another society, and vice versa. Each transition is carried out by a ritual, in this ritual it is also called initiation, which is a ceremony of transitioning a person's life.

3.3 Symbolic Meaning

The universe is understood by the Sea Tribe people as a medium that helps them throughout their lives [9]. In this case, the universe is understood by the Sea Tribe people as providing sustenance for their daily lives. However, the Sea remains the center of the universe for the Sea Tribe people. Of course, the sea is their home and where they seek sustenance. Apart from that, the Sea and everything in it is the abode of the Sea God who is believed by the Sea Tribe people. Since birth, the Sea Tribe people have been accustomed to being one with

marine life. Thus, they had extraordinary knowledge of the winds, currents, and tides that govern the sea, of locations in the ocean rich in fish, of mangrove swamps, of the positions of the sun, moon, and stars with which to navigate their way. through the islands.

Basically, the people of the Panglong Bintan Sea Tribe understand "The Divine" as the God of the Sea [10]. In this case, the Sea God is the "owner" who always protects them, provides them with sustenance and bestows blessings on the community in the form of health, protection from danger and illness, and so on. Apart from that, the Sea God who is believed by the Sea Tribe people to have jurisdiction over their respective dimensions. The Sea Gods consist of: Jerambang (the highest God of the Sea), the water center person, the river flow person (going on), the head garang person (the Sea Tribe people believe that he is the guardian of every island on the edge of the sea), the water navel (Sea Tribe people believe that water navels are present like water foam in the sea), water teeth (Sea Tribe people believe that they are present when sea water is sharing a current, that is, it is clear and clean).

The Sea Tribe people understand that the doctrine of humans is themselves (Sea Tribe people) who are the main actors in the Semah Laut Ritual. As humans who have human weaknesses and limitations, the Sea Tribe people believe that all their sustenance and life comes from the Sea God. Therefore, it is important for the Sea Tribe people to give back to the Sea God who has given them sustenance. This will later become the main tendency of the Semah Laut Ritual, namely: expression of gratitude, rejection of reinforcements and request for good fortune. In the Semah Laut Ritual, there are many symbols used by the Sea Tribe people, such as: yellow pulut which is the most important symbol used in the Semah Laut Ritual and is an offering to Jerambang (the highest God of the Sea) eggs which are an offering to the sea god coast guard, betel nut and betel bakik (various items contained in betel nut) which are expressions of requests for safety, green beans and cigarettes which are offerings to the Sea God to be eaten by the seven Sea Gods, as well as banana leaves which are a medium for placing all offering materials.

The taboo in Sea Tribe society is coral reefs. Coral reefs are a gathering place for all the Sea Gods. Therefore, if they destroy coral reefs, it is the same as destroying the home of the Sea God to gather together. For this reason, in their daily life practices, the Sea Tribe people use simple tools in order to preserve the natural environment, especially the sea and everything in it. Coral reefs are limestone sedimentary rocks formed from calcium carbonate produced by marine biota that produce calcium carbonate which then goes through a sedimentation process [11]. Sedimentation that occurs on reefs can come from coral or algae. In and around coral reefs, a variety of biota live, which are generally invertebrate animals. These animals include crustaceans, snails and shellfish, sea urchins, sea anemones, sea cucumbers, starfish, small fish, sea snakes, sea turtles, algae and algae. Various benefits of coral reefs can be produced by coral reefs but their management needs to be regulated because coral reefs are shallow marine ecosystems that exist in tropical climates which are the most complex and productive but are also the ecosystems that are most vulnerable to environmental changes and also have limited carrying capacity. Coral reefs are also known as laboratories for ecological science. The potential for medicinal, anti-viral, anti-cancer and other uses is very high.

4 Conclusion

The belief in nature for the people of the Panglong Sea Tribe has resulted in a belief that is spiritual in nature so that it eventually becomes a tradition. The people who perform these rituals believe in something good from nature, so they have a spiritual perspective and

ultimately become beliefs and traditions that are displayed through the rituals they carry out. In this case, something sacred lies in the attitude of respect for coral reefs which are considered the abode of the Sea God, while something profane is the habit of the Sea Tribe people who always ask for the Sea God's blessing before going fishing.

Coral reefs are a habitat and food source for various types of living creatures in the ocean. In coral reefs, there are various types of marine life that live, take shelter, find food and reproduce. Not only marine creatures, coral reefs are also useful for protecting the surrounding ecosystem. Coral reefs can reduce the energy of waves moving towards land so they can protect the function of mangrove forests, beaches and coastlines from abrasion or damage. Coral reefs are dynamic ecosystems with rich biodiversity and high productivity, therefore coral reefs have a significant role. Ecologically, coral reefs are a place for animal and plant organisms to find food and shelter. Physically, it protects beaches and shallow water ecosystems from sea abrasion.

Apparently, this is also part of a belief system that leads to something sacred (transcendent) but is also open to the preservation of nature, which at the same time shows a symbiotic element between nature and the transcendent. This is a belief system that leads to something sacred (transcendent) but at the same time is also open to the preservation of nature, which at the same time shows a symbiotic element between nature and the transcendent. This ritual contains various moral values that are visible through the ritual ceremony and contains local wisdom values.

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