

Babalian and Community Rituals of *Dusun Tatana* Ethnic in Sabah, Malaysia: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

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The belief system and cosmology of the *Dusun Tatana* ethnic which formulate the existence of *Kinorohingan* or *Kinoingan* (God or Creator of universe), is central in understanding the practice of rituals among this community. The word *Tatana* which means 'earth people' forms one of the 79 sub-ethnics of Kadazandusun in Sabah who are found mainly in the Kuala Penyu division of West Sabah, Malaysia. *Tatana* has a long history and tradition which are embedded not only in their myths, legends and oral stories but also in their ritual ceremonies and healings. These traditional/ cultural and ritual activities are considered as trajectories of their wisdom, maturity as well as about their cosmology and the existence of life. However, comprehensive studies on the *Tatana*'s rituals such as *talang pongoh*, *mikajang*, *mamanta* and *barasik* are very much lacking. This research traces the roles played by the *babalian* within their community by exploring and analysing their roles, methods and healing paraphernalia in several community rituals. Ultimately it is shown that these traditional rituals have become unimportant and the *babalian*'s roles have also waned as the *Dusun Tatana* community adapt to lifestyle changes and religion.

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Keywords: *Babalian*; *talang pongoh*; *barasik*; *Tatana*; rituals.

1. Introduction

Traditional healing performances among various communities throughout the world have been performed and celebrated for many generations. These activities are considered as narratologies of their wisdom and maturity besides providing information about their cosmology and the existence of life. Traditional healing performances have developed, changed and matured due to social-political-

cultural-economic influences in the era of globalization. Melanesian and Polynesian communities for instance, believed that sources of ailments and healing paraphernalia are related to supernatural and magical elements. According to Carol Laderman (1996);

“...Should an illness appear to be unusual, suspicions about the ailment may arise that the sufferer’s problem is due to attacks of spirits, either sent by ill-wishers or acting on their own initiatives or to an imbalance of the component parts of the patient’s self...”

This article attempts to expose, explore and analyse the roles, methods and the usage of paraphernalia for traditional healing as well as analysing the relationship between *babalian* and the community. Dusun Tatana is one of 79 sub-ethnic groups in the Dusun’s tribe in Sabah. The word Tatana means ‘earth people’ and the majority of Dusun Tatana mainly residing in the district of Kuala Penyu, Sabah and they converse in their own dialect which is known as *Gia Tatana* which derives from Dusunic language cluster (Sabah Cultural Board, 2010).

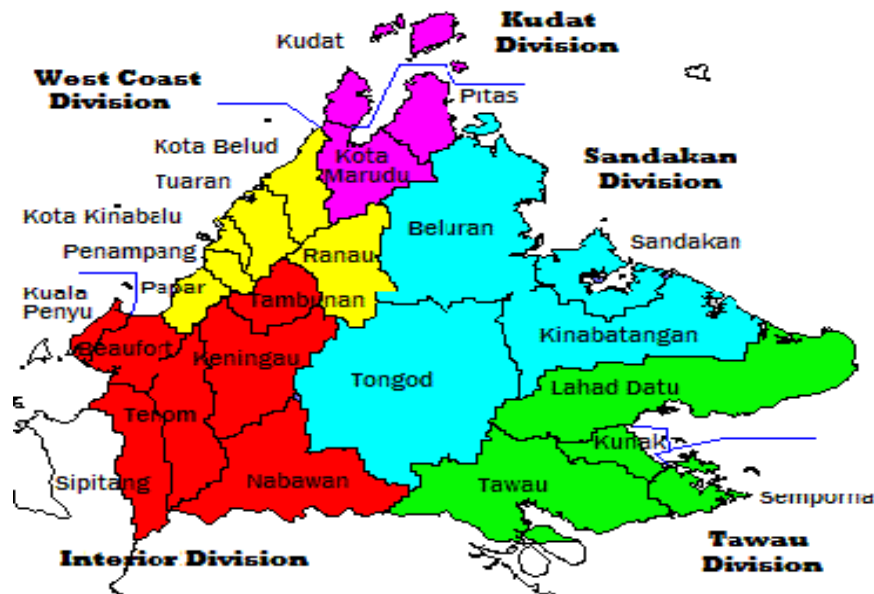


Fig. 1. Map of Sabah, Malaysia which shows the location of Kuala Penyu on the west part of Sabah

The Dusun Tatana believes in the existence of *kinorohingan* or *kinoingan* which refers to God, the creator of universe and the importance of *bambaraiyon* or paddy spirit. Thus, paddy harvesting is considered as sacred activity. It encourages community engagement in their ritual ceremony, the *unduk ngadau kaamatan* or *tadau kaamatan* (Kaamatan Festival) which symbolises of respect and gratitude towards the spirits. Throughout Southeast Asia including the Tatana’s, paddy is not only a staple food but it also a sacred plant. Rice is thought to have a spirit or a soul hence its cultivation is regarded as both a ritual and practical endeavour. These ritual ceremonies continue to be practised and are still considered relevant and important. Consequently, they pay undivided respect to spirits like the *divato* (good spirit) and *lumaag* (mystical force) in their rituals such as *mikajang*, *talang pongoh*, and *mamanta* ritual except for *barasik* and *mansapi* which are performed to cure ailments.

The Tatana's conceptions of the cosmos is very much similar to most indigenous communities in Malaysia regardless the religion, race, area and language. The characteristics of human beings encompassed within the elements of 'earth', 'wind', 'fire' and 'water' are embedded and accepted in their belief systems. It is exemplified in the way human beings interact, intersect, reciprocate and respect the existence of nature, plant and animal into their lives. On another level, they also have to acknowledge the existence of a nether world whereby human beings and spirits are sharing the same universe albeit in a different world: parallel universe of the nether world. At the higher level, they believe in the existence of god or gods not only in their life but also in the before and after life-life. In order to better understand their culture and social practices, it is crucial to note and acknowledge all these parameters because whatever they do in their normal chores, it almost always extends way beyond just their individual purposes or goals. This is so because it amalgamates all the reactions, influences and how these affect other human beings, animals, plants, nature and the supernatural world. Eventually all the actions and practices will be judged by the god or gods.

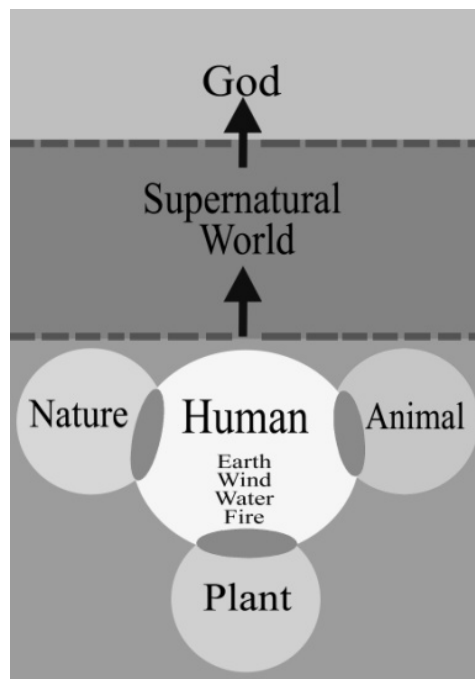


Fig.2. This model represents the cosmology of life among the local traditional community in Malaysia. The chart shows the relationship and connection between human beings and other elements in their everyday life.

2. The *Babalian's* Roles

The interactions amongst human beings, between plants, nature and animals are visible. The connections between human and spirits in the nether world are invisible and can only be accessed and achieved by those who have the capabilities or they are so gifted that they would be able to see through and beyond the everyday world to the unseen world. The only person able to see and communicate with these spirits is the local shaman, known among the Dusun Tatana ethnic group as the *babalian* who functions as an intermediary between human beings and supernatural beings and is responsible to alleviate afflictions of infertility, disease, misfortune or even crop failure. It is necessary to note that each tribe or ethnic group in Sabah refer to the shaman using different names, and is based on the gender of the *babalian*. For instance, the *babalian* in the *barasik* ritual is a male is known as

'*dambiak*'. The majority of ethnic groups in Sabah will refer the shaman as *babalian* but different parts or ethnic groups will refer their shaman in their own dialects or terms as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. This table shows different names for shaman in Sabah based on the area and ethnicity.

Shaman	Area	Ethnic
<i>Babalian</i>	Beaufort, Keningau, Tenom, Kuala Penyu, Membakut	Tatana, Bisaya, Murut
<i>Bobolian</i>	Tambunan, Keningau, Ranau, Kota Belud, Telupid, Kinabatangan, Beluran	Kadazan
<i>Bobohizan/Bobohian</i>	Penampang, Papar	Kadazan
<i>Bobolizan</i>	Kudat, Kota Marudu	Rungus
<i>Tantagas</i>	Tuaran (female) Kota Belud (male)	Lotud
<i>Lumahon</i>	Nabawan, Tenom, Kemabong, Pensiangan (male and female)	Murut
<i>Bobogo, Dambiak</i>	Kuala Penyu (male)	Tatana
<i>Penyupi</i>	Kuala Penyu (female for <i>Moginum</i> ceremony)	Tatana
<i>Mogogondi</i>	Keningau	Murut
<i>Omboh</i>	Semporna	Bajau Laut



Fig. 3. *Babalian* of Dusun Tatana. Kamloi Tanim (Left), Tialum Siwoi (Middle) and Amoi Otan (Right). Photo by A.S.Hardy Shafii.

Babalian is believed to be very familiar with the supernatural world and its operation. She has a *gimbaran* (helper spirits) and the natural skills to communicate and negotiate with *Kinorohingan*, demigods and spirits (*divato* and the *rogon*) during the healing and trance periods by using the *komburongoh*. The *komburongoh* is an invaluable magical plant that has great significance in Dusun ritual ceremonies. This plant has spirits whom *babalian* consult with during rituals. For a person to be recognised as a *babalian*, she must have the ability to memorise and then recite the *rinait* or *momurinait* which are the sacred verses. In the Tatana's society, which has an egalitarian social structure, the spirit mediums are usually women. According to Kamloi Tanim it is believed that biologically and psychologically, the female *babalian* is not only 'cleaner', she is also able to communicate better with supernatural beings vis-à-vis a male *babalian*. Hanafi (2003) added that *babalians* are usually female; they are normally old or 'experienced' married women with children and grandchildren. Most *babalians* become *babalians* by inheriting this special gift which is passed down to them in various ways, usually through dreams. But there are also *babalians* who did not inherit this gift, instead they learned through a process of "apprenticeship" or *sumapad*, usually by being an

assistant to an experienced *babalian*. Gradually after a few years of observing and helping their teacher, they too can decide and choose whether they really want to become the official *babalian* or not.

Being a *babalian* is not an easy task for it means being bound to serve several social commitments, and by extension, being responsible to the whole community at large. A *babalian* plays a very significant role in the Dusun Tatana community. As a shaman or a ritual specialist, the *babalian* is able to connect and communicate with the supernatural world. She is the intermediary connecting the world of human beings with the spiritual world. She is also an expert in traditional healing and hence must play roles to help the community when needed. She must lead all ritual activities; to decide on the type of *sogit* or penalty for those who found guilty on social matters and predict or decide on the right day and date for specific activities to be carried out in the village community. Finally as a spiritual consultant, the *babalian* will share her opinion on social-political-cultural-economic aspects involving the Tatana people.

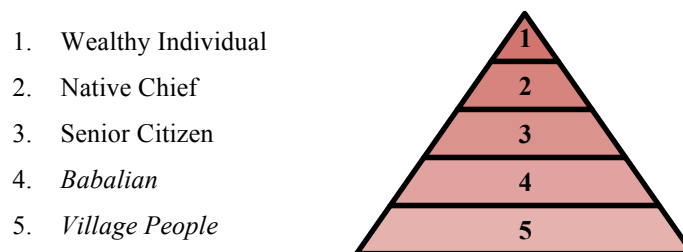


Fig. 4. Social structure of Tatana has been practised before and after the implementation of British Resident in Sabah. This is to indicate *babalian*'s special status in Tatana's social structure.

3. The Talang Pongoh and Mikajang Rituals

The *talang pongoh* is one of the many rituals practised among Dusun Tatana. It is a ritual done to formally officiate the paddy planting season and is usually conducted right in the middle of the paddy field. The role of the *babalian* is crucial at this stage as accompanied with special offerings, she will 'communicate' with the *Lumaag Nu Bilod* or *Bambarayon*, the paddy spirit. In this particular role, the female *babalian* is known as *ulun manalang*. According to Monih Epin, the whole offering is called '*ganja*' and consist of *Inamping* (a type of fried rice and grains drink mixed with coconut water), *Kolupis* (glutinous rice), *Sada* (catfish dish), *Piasau* (coconut), *Kinotuan kulit sangop* (pickled cucumber), *Antalu manuk batanok* (boiled eggs), *Inggaton* (betel nut). The *Ulun manalang* or *babalian* will pray and recite her *rinait* (prayers) to call upon *Lumaag Nu Bilod*. During this ceremony, it is absolutely forbidden for anyone to walk past the *babalian* as this would cause unfortunate things to occur. After the chanting of the *rinait* is completed, the *babalian* will pluck seven stalks of the best paddy and take it to the owner's home. This is to indicate the return of the *Lumaag Nu Bilod* which would be wrapped in *daun simpur* (*simpur* leaves) with a small bottle of coconut oil attached to it. The paddy stalks will be hanged at the *angkob* (the storage area) while other parts of the offerings will be

taken home to eat. The rest of the *ganja* will be left in the middle of the paddy field. As a ritual specialist, the *babalian* will usually be approached by the village head/leader to perform a ritual known as the *mikajang*, the act of feasting or feeding the spirits so as to ensure that the spirits (*divato*) would bless the efforts of local farmers and that they would get better harvests in the following years. This ritual is accompanied by playing a set of Tatana gongs in the middle of the mangrove area or paddy field within a ritual hut known as *mitogom*. Etymologically *mi* means custom and *kajang* is derived from local wood known as *langut-langut*. The community believes that only the *langut-langut* should be used for the *mikajang*'s ritual which is usually conducted in November, December and January in conjunction with the harvesting season.



Fig. 5. Ritual hut known as *mitogom*. Photo by A.S. Hardy Shafii.

4. Barasik

The *barasik* is a healing ritual ceremony performed when an illness is believed to have been caused by an evil spirits. Literally, *barasik* means 'to cure a sick person'. The ailments could be attributed to black magic or it could just be a fever or the patient could have been possessed by spirits. An illness is the result of harm done to the soul when it is absenting itself from the body or when it has been captured by a *rogon*. The *babalian* for *barasik* has to be a male ritual specialist, known by the Tatana's as the *dambiak*. His assistant or apprentice is known as *malim*. The *dambiak* is expected to cast out the spirit/s causing the illness. Kamloi Tanim explained that the *divato*, which represents a good spirit, will identify the right *babalian* through a dream to carry out the ritual.

Babalian has his own costume called the *baju adat* known as *sira dambiak* (for female *babalians*, the costume is referred as *sira lambung*). This ritual costume is normally black in colour with long sleeves, it has a collar and is embroidered with red and gold thread. By wearing the *sira dambiak*, it is believed that evil or black spirits will not possess the *babalian* during the trance or during the *mengalai* (dancing) ritual. A piece of cloth is fastened around his waist and a sash is tied across one shoulder and then twisted or wrapped around his waist. A piece of red cloth is thus used to completely cover his face and head.



Fig. 6. Kamloi Tanim demonstrates the *mengalai* at his residence in Kuala Penyu, Sabah, August 2015. (Left and middle photo). Picture on the right shows the mannequin of *dambiak* during an exhibition on Malaysian traditional healing ceremonies.

During the ritual, the *babalian* sits cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the room accompanied by special offerings. A brass box, called *longguai* containing a lighted candle will be placed in front of the *babalian*. There is also another brass box container containing ingredients for chewing betel, cigarettes and an ash tray. The offerings and props are *ketupat nasi* or rice cakes which are shaped to represent chicken, squirrel, heart, honey and also normal rice cakes, a bottle of rice wine, a kettle of another type of drink, banana, local candy, egg fritters, rice covered with banana leaves, *ajung* (a small sampan), and the four reed poled *Sangkuban* structure. The *Sangkuban* a structure specially prepared for this ritual ceremony is placed in the centre of the room behind the *babalian*. The *babalian* will chant the *rinait* for several minutes as he holds an oriental fan in his hands. The fan testifies to the Chinese influence in this ritual. Nobody knows the meaning of the *rinait*s which has been transcribed below by Jainudin Nasir (1998).

“...*Ijsupi ku ih komburongoh iburo*
ku ih rinondokan palandako
ku do dilah pesirido ku do munung...
andang-andang kesitu babarahi
ih berakat tuan sari komburongoh
empino dodogo menuru monihis...”

During this particular scene, no one is allowed to walk past the *babalian*. Total absolute silence is required. Once the presence of *divato* is felt, *babalian* will signal to his assistant, *malim*, to hit the gong. The complete set of the Tatana’s gong consists of ‘*gandang*’ (drum) and a pair of sticks, a pair of *sanang* (gong), set of *kulintangan*, *lolotukon*, *togungguon*, *pambaam* (these four types of gongs are made of steel). Once possessed, the *babalian* will *mengalai* (dance) around the *sangkuban* while the gongs and drums continuously accompany the *babalian* as he alternately dances and sits on the floor. The *Rinait*s are delivered in different languages or dialects: Dusun, Bisayah, Brunei. According to Phyllis (1988);

“...after few sessions of *mengalai* and *rinait*s, (the) *babalian* sets a flat dish containing a dark liquid (like soy sauce) on the floor in front of him. He takes an egg from the dish on the table and attempts to stand it on end in the liquid. Unsuccessful, (the) *babalian* once again dances around the *sangkuban* until finally the egg stands on end...”

The *Babalian* will be naming and identifying the various ailments to the spirits. It is only when the exact cause of the sick person's ailment is identified that magically the egg would stand on end. Once the cause is known, the person can then be treated. To cast out the evil spirit, the *babalian* will swing a small boat made of bark, from front to back several times. The small boat has two carved figures, one standing at the bow on a boom and the other in the stern of the boat with its hands on the rudder. The *babalian* will fall into unconsciousness indicating that the ceremony has been successful in casting out the evil spirit/s from the sick person. If the patient is sick because of someone's ill-wishes, the patient would usually have to bathe with the *daun limau* (lime leaves) in the morning. After the ritual, all activities in that particular area would be banned for a week. The *barasik* ritual normally takes 2 days and is followed by another ritual known as the *mamanta* on the third day.

5. Conclusion

The *babalian* who is the shaman or ritual specialist is known by different names depending on the ethnic, language, area, and also gender. The paraphernalia, costume, props, musical instruments and the *rinaitis* may differ but the objectives are all the same. When the person accepts the call to become a *babalian*, s/he takes on a huge responsibility not only as an individual but also as a member of his/her community. Once a commitment is made to become an official *babalian*, he or she must serve the community and play a role in social and communal ceremonies unless s/he reveals to the *divato* through dreams that s/he no longer wish to serve the community as a *babalian*.

Nowadays, most *babalians* have converted to Christianity or they have embraced Islam and become Muslims. As such, their religion would forbid them from doing these rituals. This has the possibility of leading to the gradual demise of Tatana rituals throughout Sabah. It can be concluded that *babalians* conducting these rituals would eventually disappear in 10-20 years because of religion factors. Moreover, as the existing *babalian* are old, they have become unfit both physically and mentally to carry out the rigorous and demanding rituals. The younger generation are also not interested to learn these special ritual skills. Sadly, these rituals will be showcased for mere entertainment and educational purposes or as cultural relics in the near future.

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