

Commodification of Exotic Culture

The Case of the Bajo in Wakatobi Islands, South East Sulawesi

Benny Baskara

Abstract

The Bajo people are the maritime ethnic group who live spreadout through South East Asian waters, including in Indonesia. The Bajo were formerly known as the sea wanderer, sea nomads, or sea gypsies, because of their sea nomadic life with their traditional boats. However, almost all of them now are living in sedentary communities. They build their settlements in shores or atolls, but still above the sea water, and not on the land. Their life cannot be separated with the sea, and are always attached to the sea. Because of their maritime way of life, therefore, the Bajo are also known as the sea people.

The maritime way of life of the Bajo is a unique way of life, which fascinates and invites curiosity to the others to know and explore more on their life. At the same time, this curiosity becomes an opportunity for other parties to introduce and sell the uniqueness of the Bajo to wider market. Commodification of the Bajo culture then arises as a bridge to connect both sides. This paper focuses on the Bajo community who live in Wakatobi Islands, and describes the commodification of the Bajo culture, either by Wakatobi regency government or by other private parties, for the sake of tourism and other interests.

The form of commodification of the Bajo culture is capturing their cultural activities and exposing them in several media, and then distribute the result to the public or sell them to wider market. The commodification activity done by Wakatobi regency government is producing documentary film on the Bajo, and distribute the film to the public for tourist promotion. The Wakatobi regency government is also sponsoring the performance of the Bajo traditional ritual, *duata*, to the public as performance art and tourist attraction. The making of documentary film on the Bajo is also done by private televisions and broadcast it as public consumption. The other form of commodification done by private parties is producing merchandise with Bajo cultural theme and selling them as souvenirs.

Keywords: Bajo, commodification, Wakatobi

1. Introduction

The Bajo are the maritime ethnic group who live in the sea. Formerly, the Bajo lived nomadic in the sea, they always wandered the sea in their traditional boat called *leppa*. Because of their sea nomadic life, the Bajo were formerly known as the sea nomads or the sea gypsies (see Sather, 1997; Chou, 2003, 2010). With their background as the sea nomads, therefore the Bajo are dispersed around Southeast Asian waters, including in Indonesia. In recent times, almost all of the Bajo are already live in sedentary communities. However, they still build their settlements in the sea or above the sea water, and not in the land, which shows that their life is always attached and cannot be separated to the sea. With this maritime way of life, then the Bajo are known as the sea people (see Zacot, 2008).

The maritime way of life of the Bajo in the sea becomes a unique and exotic way of life, especially for most people who live in the land. The unique life of the Bajo is fascinating and interesting for the land people, and invites curiosity to know and explore further about their life. The common questions raised by the land people about the Bajo for example are how the Bajo can survive in their life in the sea, what activities they do in their daily life in the sea, and why the Bajo choose to live in the sea rather than in the land as the most people live? Meanwhile, for those who already have a little knowledge about the Bajo, they acknowledge that the Bajo are the sea people who have an excellent ability in sailing and maritime world in general. The Bajo are also known as the excellent fisherman, who are able to dive and endure underwater to catch and hunt fish, which cannot be done by most of the land people.

Departed from the curiosity above, now the exploration on the life and culture of the Bajo is intensively conducted. In the hand of economic and industrial interests, this curiosity and its continuity to the exploration of the life of the Bajo is transferred into commodification of the life and culture of the Bajo. In the eyes of economic interest, the curiosity toward the life of the Bajo becomes an opportunity to capture their life and culture, and expose the result to the public or sell it to the wider market. As it is driven by the basic economic principle, if there is a demand, then it becomes an opportunity to fulfill it by providing supply. The commodification of the Bajo culture then becomes a bridge to connect both sides, the life and culture of the Bajo on the supply side, to fulfill the curiosity toward it on the demand side.

This paper focuses on the Bajo community who live in Wakatobi Islands, and describes the commodification of the life and culture of the Bajo who live in Wakatobi Islands. The agent of commodification itself can be Wakatobi regency government or other private parties. The purposes of commodification of the life and culture of the Bajo are mostly for the sake of tourism and also for other interests. This paper also describes whether or not the commodification of the life and culture of the Bajo has impacts or contributions toward the life of Bajo itself, and how the Bajo response to the commodification that happened toward their life and culture.

2. Research Problems

Based on the background stated above, research problems that can be formulated are as follows:

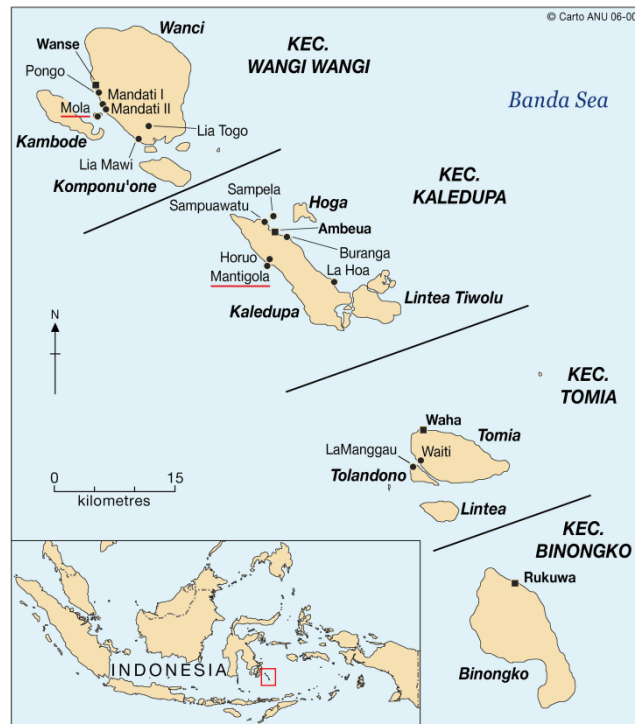
1. How the commodification of the life and culture of the Bajo who live in Wakatobi Islands take place and take forms?
2. How the Bajo in Wakatobi Islands are responding to the commodification that happened to their life and culture?

3. Discussion

3.1 The life of the Bajo in Wakatobi Islands

The Wakatobi Islands is located in the South East of Sulawesi and Buton Island. The name “Wakatobi” itself is taken from the acronym of its four major islands: *Wangi-Wangi*, *Kaledupa*, *Tomia*, and *Binongko*. Before the independence of Indonesia, the Wakatobi Islands was belonged to Buton Sultanate. In the colonial era, when the Dutch conquered Buton Sultanate, the Wakatobi Islands was called *Tukang Besi Islands*, because these islands were known for its blacksmiths (*tukang besi*).

Nowadays, especially under the spirit of regional autonomy and the emerging of new autonomous regions, the Wakatobi Islands become the autonomous regency (*Kabupaten Wakatobi*), and belong to South East Sulawesi province. Formerly, the Wakatobi Islands was belonged to Buton regency (*kabupaten Buton*). Meanwhile, each of four major islands becomes its districts (*kecamatan*). The map of Wakatobi Islands can be seen in the picture below:



Picture 1. The map of Wakatobi Islands (source: Stacey, 2007)

There are five Bajo villages or settlements located in Wakatobi Islands. Those Bajo villages are: Mola, which located in the coastal area of Wangi-wangi Island, then Mantigola, Sampela, and La Hoa, which located off shore near Kaledupa Island, and La Manggau, which located in the coastal area of Tomia Island (see the map above). The observation is focused to the Bajo who lived in Mola village, because they are the most possible target for the commodification process to expose their life and culture. The most significant reason is because the location of Mola is near Wanci, the capital city of Wakatobi regency, in Wangi-Wangi Island.

Although the Bajo build their settlement in shores or atolls, they still build their house in the sea, upside the sea water, and not in the land. Firstly, they build their houses as a wooden stage house upside sea water, built upon wood log pile erected on the sea bed. They bit-by-bit collect coral stones from the sea bed, and embanking the sea surrounding their houses to strengthen its foundation. The more houses built, their settlement getting wider and forming a village. In this settlement, in their houses built upside water, the Bajo are spend their life. Their life in the sea settlement offers an exotic way of life, which invites curiosity and fascinating to other people who live “normally” in the land, and opens the opportunity to expose them.

3.2 Commodification and Tourism

In a quick sense, commodification is the change of ordinary things become commodity, or giving economic value to things that do not have economic value before. Commodification also means the market expansion toward non-tradable goods, and turns them into tradable commodity in the market. The more detail definition is given by Cohen (1988, cited from Thu Thuy, 2012) who said: “commodification is a process by which things (and activities) come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value, in the context of trade, thereby becoming goods (and services) ... in which the exchange value of things (and activities) is stated in terms of prices from a market.” Meanwhile, according to Fealy (2008, p.16-17): “Commodity is something that has the quality of being desirable or useful, or as an article of commerce or object of trade. Commodification means turning something into a commodity that capable of being bought and sold for profit.”

One of influential factors evoking commodification to take place is tourism. The present of tourists in certain place bring along their curiosity and enthusiasm, which create a demand at the same time. The demand will stimulate the ordinary things in that place, which usually used by local communities for example, to be sold to the tourists. For Chris Rojek (in Gottdiener, 2000, p. xi), even tourism itself is a form of commodification. He said: “Tourism is a form of consumption that, by definition, is liberated from the world of work. Tourism is simply a packaged, commodified form of consumption that is skillfully marketed as a respite from the economic content of the working life, but in reality it is merely an extension of late capitalism. Tourism today is characterized by its highly commodified nature.”

In tourism, commodification usually happened to local cultures, especially to cultural products. However, cultural product itself cannot fully represents the culture, which Can Seng Ooi (2002) said the cultural products are only a “decentring” culture, because there is a gap between cultural products and the real culture itself represented in the products. In explaining this phenomenon, Can Seng Ooi said:

“The essence of local culture is decentred from the cultural product because the product is only a representation. The packaged product, however careful and detailed its presentation, cannot offer the bridge to the gap between representation and the aura of the object. In tourism, this gap is made wider by the economic motivation in representing the culture; the profit motive influences how the culture is represented.” (Can Seng Ooi, 2002, p.23)

3.3 The Policy of Wakatobi Government on Tourism

As the new emerging regency, Wakatobi regency government make tourism as a leading sector for regional development. Intensive campaign to promote tourism has been conducted to introduce Wakatobi to wider public and to attract tourists to visit Wakatobi. As archipelagic region with most of its areas are water, the promotion for tourism in Wakatobi is mostly exposing beautiful beaches and exciting underwater panorama, by which Wakatobi wants to be a “place must visit” for underwater activities, such as diving, snorkeling, and other water adventure activities. With the slogan “Wakatobi: the heart of the world coral triangle” which offers the “underwater paradise”, Wakatobi government want to invite as much as underwater adventure tourists to visit Wakatobi. Meanwhile, the expose of the richness of local communities’ culture, including the Bajo, becomes the supporting sector for underwater tourism as the leading sector.

The program of Wakatobi government to make tourism as the leading sector for regional development is in line with Scheyvens’ opinion, which stated that “(since) 1970s, tourism became the major economic sector, and government pursued tourism development with a passion” (Scheyvens, 2002, p.23). The tourism program focusing on ecotourism and cultural tourism, such as Wakatobi government did, also become an attractive field in tourism itself in general, as Scheyvens maintained: “not only tourism industries, governmental agencies and tourism academics have been caught up (attracted) in the ‘new’ forms of tourism such as ecotourism and cultural tourism” (Scheyvens, 2002, p.12).

To implement and realize the ecotourism program, the Wakatobi government is collaborated with international conservancy institutions, such as TNC (The Nature Conservancy) and WWF (World Wildlife Fund), national institutions such as Ministry of Environmental Affairs and Bureau of Natural Resources Conservancy (BKSDA), founding a conservational water area called “Wakatobi Marine National Park”, which officially accepted by Indonesian government. In the areas of the marine national park, the zoning system is created to divide two main activities: the zone for exploitation and the zone for conservancy that becomes restricted areas for exploitation. Ecotourism can be applied freely in the open zones, but it should have permission to apply it in the conservancy zones.

3.4 The Form of Commodification of the Bajo Culture

3.4.1 The Bajo Merchandise

The Bajo merchandise is accessories or other decorative things, such as key holders, stickers, or T-shirts, with the theme of anything concerns with the Bajo, and to be sold as souvenirs. One company who produce and sell the Bajo merchandise is Bonti. Bonti company itself even is not located in Wakatobi, but in Kendari, the capital city of South East Sulawesi Province, which its distance is more than 200 km from Wakatobi, and do not owned by the Bajo. The main product of Bonti is T-shirts, but they also have other products such as key holders and stickers. The marketing strategy of Bonti is mainly based on order via online marketing, either via internet or via Blackberry Messenger (BBM), then the merchandise will directly send to the customer. Therefore, Bonti only have one outlet in Kendari, and generally consign their products to some stores in other areas, including in Wakatobi.

Actually, Bonti do not produce their merchandise by themselves. The production is conducted in Bandung, West Java, by other company. Bonti only send the design to the producer, and after the product is finished as stated in the order, the producer send it back to Bonti to be sold. The general theme of Bonti products is concern with South East Sulawesi, but they have special attention to Wakatobi, including to the Bajo. The general theme of Bonti products are popular theme in South East Sulawesi, especially Kendari, as the center of popular activities. The popular themes generally are quotation of popular words or saying that usually said by Kendari people. However, when concerning Wakatobi, the themes changed into exploration of natural beauty, beach and islands scenery, and underwater scenery. While concerning the Bajo, the themes changed into exploration of their cultural activities.

One example of the theme of Bonti T-shirt concerning the Bajo is the picture of a Bajo woman riding traditional boat carrying several things, particularly water containers and a pail of fish or food, with a text “Orang Bajo, Sea Gypsies Community, Wakatobi, Southeast Sulawesi”. Although the picture looks simple, but it can capture the cultural activity of the Bajo. The Bajo women usually go to the land to get water or to the market to sell fish and to buy other supplies, while the men are go to the sea to catch fish. It reflects the gender role, or at least the division of labor based on gender, in the Bajo society, which expressed in the Bajo proverb “*dinda ngala boe, lilla palilibu*”,

which means “women go get water, men go to the sea” (see Anwar, 2006; Saifuddin, 2009). Another example of the Bajo theme on Bonti T-shirt is a picture of a Bajo girl with a text “Bajau Girl, Wakatobi, Southeast Sulawesi”. The picture seems can sharply portray the Bajo girl using traditional masking powder in her face. Indeed, the Bajo women usually use traditional masking powder made from grinded rice and curcuma (*kunyit*) to protect their face from the heat of the sun.

3.4.2 “The Mirror Never Lies” and Other Movies on the Bajo

“The Mirror Never Lies” is a title of the movie on the Bajo, and take the life of the Bajo in Wakatobi Islands as its main setting. “The Mirror Never Lies” was produced and launched in 2011. The producer of this movie is collaboration between Wakatobi government, WWF, and SET Films, and the director is Kamila Andini, the daughter of Garin Nugroho. This movie attempts to portray the life of the Bajo in Wakatobi Islands, and told a story of two Bajo children, a boy and a girl, whom their fathers were missing when they sailed in the sea. The girl missed her father and attempted to find out him using a mirror as a keepsake from him. This movie is successful enough in introducing Wakatobi, especially the life of the Bajo in Wakatobi, to wider audiences. However, some critics said that this movie is only successful in portraying the life of the Bajo, but the story itself is not based on the life of the Bajo. The Bajo have nothing to do with mirror in their tradition, and the idea of the story is completely introduced from outside, which seems exaggerating and not suitable with the real life of the Bajo.

The other movies portraying the life of the Bajo are mostly documentary movies. The documentary movies are usually produced by private televisions, purposed to expose and broadcast the unique cultures of local communities to their audiences. The unique cultures, including the Bajo culture, are interesting to expose, because it is fascinating and invites curiosity of the public. With exposing and broadcasting the unique culture of the Bajo, it will attract wider audiences and increase the rating of the program, which means it will increase the income of the television from commercial advertisement attached in this program. The Wakatobi government itself also produced some documentary movies, which purposed to promote Wakatobi tourism. One of them is a documentary movie on the Bajo greatest ritual, *duata*, and distributed in the form of Compact Disc (CD), to introduce the Bajo culture to wider public.

3.4.3 Public Performance of *Duata*, the Greatest Bajo Ritual

Duata is the greatest ritual of the Bajo, as the expression of religious identity of the Bajo. Originally, *duata* is a healing ritual, which purposed to heal someone from sickness. However, almost all aspects of the Bajo culture, such as their philosophy, cosmology, and way of life are expressed in the *duata* ritual. That is the reason why *duata* is considered as the greatest Bajo ritual. The commodification process toward *duata* by the Wakatobi government is not only captures it as a documentary movie and distribute it, as stated above, but the Wakatobi government goes further by sponsoring the performance of *duata* to the public as tourist attraction. This commodification process toward *duata* actually also means “desacralization” process of *duata*, from the greatest ritual of the Bajo to be merely as performance art.

The real *duata* as a healing ritual is performed in seven days and seven nights continuously, including for its preparation. The leader of *duata* ritual is called *pawang duata*, who usually is a *sanro* or Bajo traditional shaman. The real *duata* ritual should be conducted indoor, usually in the house of the sick people, because in the Bajo traditional belief, it is *pamali* (forbidden) for the sick people to go outside or get contact with sea water. To begin the ritual, firstly the sick people are being bathed with fresh water to purify them, and then they are being wiped and slowly smashed by a bunch of coconut flower to remove the sickness. All the process in *duata* ritual is accompanied by the beat of the Bajo traditional music, which are *gendang*, *kulintangan*, and *gong*. After a while, it seems that the spirit or supernatural power enters to the body of the *pawang* and all of the sick people. They are dancing under trance or unconscious condition along with the beat of the music. When the spirit went out from their body, they suddenly stop dancing, and it means that the sickness is already removed.

Meanwhile, in the public performance of *duata*, it is performed for 2-3 hours only. The public performance of *duata* is conducted outdoor, usually in the raft created from several boats tied together. The boldly shown aspects in the public performance of *duata* are the music and the dancing. The dancers are not the sick people, but seven girls who symbolize seven angels. They are dancing in conscious condition completely, only the *pawang* who got trance in this performance. The dancers are not being bathed in this performance, and all other process in the real *duata* ritual are conducted as formalism only, just to show them off without any purpose for healing.



Picture 2. The public performance of *duata*

3.5 The Impact of Commodification and the Bajo's Response

The process of commodification toward the Bajo culture seems do not give contribution or positive impact to the life of the Bajo themselves. The expectation that the economic condition of the Bajo is increased along with the commodification of their culture probably is too optimistic. However, at least the expectation that the Bajo are actively involved in the process of exploring and exposing their own culture to wider public, in fact it still far from reality. In this case, it can be said that the Bajo are being exploited in the process of commodification of their culture. This is because, in some extent, the Bajo do not have sufficient knowledge and awareness on tourism.

This situation is in accordance with Scheyvens' description: "communities are typically lack information, resources, and power in relation to other stakeholders in the tourism process, thus they are vulnerable to exploitation." (Scheyvens, 2002, p.9). While the ideal condition is: "community based tourism ventures are those in which the members of local communities have a high degree of control over the activities taking place, and a significant proportion of the economic benefits accrue to them." (Scheyvens, 2002, p.10). If it is seen case by case for example, in fact the Bajo do not receive economic benefit at all in the selling of the Bajo merchandise and the expose of their culture in the Bajo movies.

In the performance of *duata*, only the Bajo who involved in the performance may receive financial incentive from Wakatobi government as its sponsor. In response to the public performance of *duata*, the Bajo community in general is split into two

sides, those who agree and those who disagree. Those who agree said that the public performance of *duata* can be accepted, because *duata* is a representation of Bajo culture, while those who disagree said that the public performance of *duata* cannot be accepted, because it is similar to undermine and humiliate *duata* itself from the greatest ritual into merely a performance art. Indeed, the Bajo do not have a cultural mechanism yet to maintain their culture in facing challenges from modernity, especially tourism. Compare to the Balinese for example, they already have the “ajeg Bali” (see Allen and Palermo, 2005) to maintain their culture against the challenges of tourism, which it is better for the Bajo to have such mechanism in facing the similar challenge.

4. Conclusion

The process of commodification of the Bajo culture in Wakatobi is taking place mostly because of the influence of tourism. The agents of commodification of the Bajo culture in Wakatobi are the Wakatobi government itself who expose the Bajo as part of their program to make tourism as the leading sector of development and other private parties who want to expose the Bajo culture mainly to gain profit. The various forms of commodification of the Bajo culture done by private parties are the production and distribution of the Bajo merchandise, and capturing the life of the Bajo in the movies and distributing or broadcasting to the public to gain profit. Meanwhile, the Wakatobi government also produces a movie on *duata*, the greatest Bajo ritual. The Wakatobi government even goes further by sponsoring the public performance of *duata* as part of the tourism promotion program.

The process of commodification of the Bajo culture in fact do not give positive impact or contribution to the life of the Bajo themselves. To expect the increasing economic condition of the Bajo from the commodification process happened to their culture seems too far afield, because the Bajo themselves even do not involved in the process of commodification itself. Indeed, the Bajo do not have sufficient knowledge and cultural mechanism yet in facing challenge from tourism and commodification process toward their culture. Therefore, the commodification of the Bajo culture is nothing more than merely using the Bajo as an object to dredge up profit, or in other words, the commodification means the exploitation of the life of the Bajo.

Bibliography

- Anwar, (2006), *Kajian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Bajo, Tinjauan Historis dan Kontemporer*, (unpublished paper), Kendari: Univ. Haluoleo.
- Allen, P. and Palermo, C., (2005), *Ajeng Bali: Multiple Meanings, Diverse Agendas*, Indonesia and Malay World, vol.33 no.97, pp.239-255.
- Chou, C., (2010), *The Orang Suku Laut of Riau, Indonesia*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Chou, C., (2003), *Indonesian Sea Nomads*, London: IIAS-RoutledgeCurzon.
- Cohen, E., (1988) *Authenticity and Commodity in Tourism*, Annals of Tourism Research vol.15 no.3, pp. 271 – 386.
- Fealy, G., (2008), “Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia”, in Fealy and White (eds.), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, Canberra: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Ooi, C.S., (2002), *Cultural Tourism and Tourism Cultures*, Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Rojek, C., (2000), “Mass Tourism or the Re-Enchantment of the World? Issues and Contradictions in the Study of Travel”, in Gottdiener (ed.), *New Forms of Consumption: Consumers, Culture, and Commodification*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher Inc.
- Saifudin, (2009), *Menjaga tradisi, membangun identitas: konstruksi identitas “orang laut” di Pulau Saponda*, M.A. Thesis (unpublished). Yogyakarta: CRCS, Gadjah Mada University.
- Sather, C., (1997), *The Bajau Laut: Adaptation, History, and Fate in a Maritime Fishing Society of South-Eastern Sabah*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Scheyvens, R., (2002), *Tourism for Development*, Singapore: Pearson Education.
- Stacey, N. (2007), *Boats to burn: Bajo fishing activity in the Australian fishing zone*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Thuy, D.T., (2012), *Adaptation of the Red Yao Community to Ethnic Tourism in Sa Pa District, Lao Cai Province, Vietnam*, paper presented in the 7th Singapore Graduate Forum on Southeast Asia Studies, Singapore: Asia Research Institute.
- Zacot, F.R., (2008), *Orang Bajo, Suku Pengembara Laut*, trans. Fida Muljono and Ida Budi Pranoto, Jakarta: Gramedia-EFEO-FJP.