

**LOCAL GENIUS AS SOCIO-CULTURAL CAPITAL  
FOR EMPOWERING THE *BAJO* ETHNIC PEOPLE  
RESIDING AT THE COASTAL AREA OF *BUNGIN PERMAI* VILLAGE,  
SOUTH EAST SULAWESI**

La Ode Ali Basri<sup>1</sup>, I Gde Parimartha<sup>2</sup>,  
I Wayan Ardika<sup>2</sup>, Aron Meko Mbet<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Postgraduate Program, Udayana University

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Letters, Udayana University

E-mail: [laodeali.basri@yahoo.co.id](mailto:laodeali.basri@yahoo.co.id)

**ABSTRACT**

In this dissertation the local genius as socio-cultural capital for empowering the *Bajo* ethnic people residing at the coastal area of *Bungin Permai* Village, *Tinanggea* District, South *Konawe* Regency, South Sulawesi Province is discussed. The *Bajo* ethnic people have a set of local genius within their socio-cultural system which is reflected in their belief, tradition and custom and is used as the reference for conceiving and explaining the objective and essence of life and the world. However, such local genius has not functioned optimally yet as they are still marginalized.

This research is focused on (1) what forms of local genius serve as the socio cultural capital for empowering the *Bajo* ethnic group residing at the coastal area?; (2) how the local genius is developed to empower the *Bajo* ethnic people residing at the coastal area?; and (3) what factors which may support and obstruct the local genius used as the socio cultural capital for empowering the *Bajo* ethnic people residing at the coastal area? Qualitative method is employed in this study with the approach of cultural studies. The theories used are the post colonial theory, structural theory, generative theory, hegemony theory and semiotic theory. The techniques used for collecting the data needed are participative observation, in-depth interview, library research, and focus group discussion. The data obtained are analytically and descriptively processed and are presented in the forms of narration, tables and visual illustration.

The results of the study show that the *Bajo* ethnic people residing at *Bungin Permai* Village have a set of local genius which may be potentially used as the socio cultural capital for empowering their community such as (1) indigenous skills and knowledge; (2) working culture; and (3) local organizations. The development of the indigenous skills and knowledge (*pengetahuan dan ketrampilan asli*; hereon abbreviated to PKA) and the revitalization of their local organizations may be used as the socio cultural capital for empowering their community. The factors supporting the local genius used as the socio cultural capital to support the empowerment of the *Bajo* ethnic people residing at the coastal area are (1) availability of marine resources around the area where

they live; (2) the existence of their local organizations; (3) being supporting by the community and the government. The factors obstructing the local genius used as the socio cultural capital to support the empowerment of the Bajo ethnic people residing at the coastal area are (1) capitalistic economic transformation taking place within their community; (2) collision against the mainland community with regard to cultural values; (3) low quality human resources; (4) negative image of the Bajo community. The meanings of the local genius as the socio cultural capital for empowering the community are (1) cultural preservation; (2) community empowerment and independence.

**Keywords:** local genius, socio cultural capital, empowerment and Bajo ethnic people.

## INTRODUCTION

The Bejo ethnic people live at the coastal area of *Bungin Permai* Village, *Tinanggea* District, South *Konawe* District, South East Sulawesi Province. As the people living at the coastal area, they have a set of local genius which has been inherited from their ancestors or which has been the knowledge resulting from the interaction between them and the nature (sea). Such local genius has been the cultural element of the Bajo culture which has been preserved and has had immunity to the change taking place within the order of societal life. It has also controlled and directed the culture adhered to by the Bajo people and can be observed from their philosophical teachings stating that “*Papu manang’ ita lino bake isi-isina, kita naja manusiana mamikiria bhatingga kolena mangelolana*”, (God has created the world with what it contains for human beings and we are left to think about and manage it well and wisely). As far as this philosophy is concerned, the Bejo people are of the opinion that they will never starve or, in other words, they will never suffer from poverty as the sea and what resources it contains are limitless. Similarly, the gardens they look after and the compounds where they live also contain resources which allow them to survive. In exploring the nature, the Bajo people refer to four principles (*empat prinsip*, hereon abbreviated to 4D). They are Being Conscious (*pindara wuto*), Self Endurance (*pindara wuto*), Self Prestige (*parasaeya wuto*) and Self Confidence (*patappa wuto*).

With regard to practical skills, the Bajo people living at Bungin Village have a set of specific skills which are needed to manage fish after being caught. They are skillful in drying fish by employing *kanasa* (salting) technique, *katawo* (smoking) technique and *paminda* (preserving) technique. The dried fish is usually stored as stock for consumption during low season or the periods of time when the moon shines brightly and when it is extremely wavy and windy. In addition, they are also skilful in making condiment made from pounded and fermented shrimp or small fish (*terasi*) and in making plaited materials (*anyam-anyaman*). Furthermore, many housewives are skillful in making seaweed cakes.

In the meantime, the subsistence economic system which is still adhered to by the Bajo people has resulted in subsistence ethics. Such ethics constitutes the response they give to the fact that they are close to the critical border of subsistence reflected by their poverty and underdevelopment. It is from here that they establish their ethic foundation

of subsistence based on the principle of safety first. What is meant is that priority is given to safety and that risks are reduced. Such ethics is actualized by diversifying occupations, establishing cooperative patterns through traditional organizations such as *rarambanga* (the Bajo social network). Through this organization they cooperate and help each other in various aspects of life. They work together and help each other in producing and exploiting marine resources and in the societal activities which involve family or household network, friends and neighbors. Such a social network is established based on the philosophy of *sikaada* (mutually accepting each other's condition), *sippatapa* (mutually trusting each other) and *situlutulu* (helping each other).

The Bajo people, who work as traditional farmers, recognize that the number of resources made available by the sea is limited and will be used up or will be decreasing. Therefore, they have developed some particular environmentally-friendly tools and techniques for catching fish such as *ngarempah*, *ambai*, *matubba*, *nubba* and so forth. The amount of fish they catch and the marine yields they collect do not exceed their family needs.

However, such local genius does not function optimally. The reason is that they are still marginalized and are considered low-income community. In addition, they are still considered rough and difficult to be organized by the mainland community. Furthermore, they are always unfairly treated by the other communities such as middlemen who determine the fish price. They are also the victims of the usurers under the guise of any cooperative who give them loans with high interest. Apart from that, their underdevelopment can be seen from their limited accessibility to public and social facilities and infrastructure, their low quality human resources, their limited accessibility to capital and local product market, unavailability of any economic social organization which serves as the community development instrument.

This research aims at exploring the local genius owned by the Bajo people which may serve as the socio cultural capital for empowering the Bajo ethnic people who reside at the coastal area. The problems of this study can be formulated as follows: (1) what forms of the local genius owned by the Bajo people can serve as the socio cultural capital for empowering the Bajo ethnic of *Bungin Permai* living at the coastal area of South East Sulawesi; (2) how the local genius can be developed as a strategy for empowering the

Bajo ethnic people of *Bungin Permai* living at the coastal area; and (3) what factors may support and obstruct the local genius used as the socio cultural capital for empowering the Bajo community, and what are the meanings of the local genius used as the capital for empowering the community.

## **MATERIAL AND DISCUSSION**

Qualitative method is used to present the local genius owned by the Bajo people living at the coastal area of *Bungin Permai* Village, *Tinanggea* District, South *Konawe* Regency, South East Sulawesi Province which is used as the socio cultural capital for empowering the community. Then the local genius owned by the Bajo ethnic group is transformed into a strategy for empowering them. This study was conducted in several stages. *First*, the ethnographic data on the Bajo people with their local genius were collected. Then the collected data were initially analyzed for construction as the capital for empowering the community. *Second*, the theories used to analyze the problems were selected such as the postcolonial theory, structural theory, hegemony theory, generative theory and semiotic theory. *Third*, the data were compiled, categorized, compared and interpreted. *Fourth*, the results of the research were written.

## **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The findings of the study can be generally described as follows:

1. The stigma stating that the Bajo community is less civilized is a construction of political interests and capitalistic economy which have been transformed through the state strength starting from the central government to the local entrepreneurs and their cronies. The reason is that as far as the empirical data on the Bajo people is concerned, they have a set of highly strategic and potential high local values which may be used as a strategy for empowering the local culturally-based people living in the coastal area, and which may be potentially packaged as an alternative model for managing marine and coastal resources. The conventional environmental management model has failed. Nowadays, the sea and coastal environment is extremely damaged, resulting from the excessive extraction and less attention paid to the aspect of sustainability. The local genius which may be

reproduced as the strategy for empowering the community includes the revitalization of their indigenous knowledge and the revitalization of function of *rarambanga*. While the local genius which may be constructed as the model of marine and coastal resources is their ecological local genius. The normative regulations they have applied should be changed into the village legal formal regulations (referred to *Peraturan Desa*). However, such a legal transformation should start from an initial stage as what they have done so far to manage the sea is part their habit (*folkways*).

2. The Bajo people have been exploited by the other parties or communities. This and their more and more complex daily needs have been responsible for their getting powerless. In order to survive, they have used their set of local genius as the socio cultural capital. However, their local genius which cannot be separated from mystical belief tend to be left behind. The globalization current which does not believe in mystics, mythology and other irrational things has been responsible for the extinction of their mystical local genius and its substances. In addition, the growth of population leading to the rise in economic needs has made them do their best to find easier ways of collecting money which tend to break their ascetic values.
3. Socio-culturally, they are fishermen which are different from the other communities. Such a difference can be seen from their mentality and living orientation. As fishermen, who catch fish, they are faced with ecological situation and domain and it is difficult to control their products as their targets are the wild sea resources. In other words, their targets are not permanent in nature. This means that the amount of their products cannot be predicted, depending on the weather and the situation of the marine resources, especially fish. They consider that managing the marine sources are their main job, although they know that this is a highly risky job as the sea is such an open accessible area that competition among fishermen frequently takes place. According to them, working as fishermen is not just a profession but has been the only way of life. Therefore, the Bejo people will always inherit the catching fish tradition to the next generation although such a profession is still marginalized.

## CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

The conclusions of the study can be described as follows:

1. One form of the local genius owned by the Bajo people living at *Bungi Permai* Village which can be used as the socio cultural capital for empowering the community is their traditional organization. It is used as the umbrella for protecting their social activities and as the strategy to encounter the pressures resulting from the attempts made to fulfill their needs. Such a local organization is known as the *rarambanga* or the social network by which they work together and help each other to fulfill their needs based on the philosophy of *situlutulu* (helping each other), *sippatappa* (trusting each other), *sikaada* (accepting one's advantages and disadvantages). The forms of the local genius which are used as the cultural capital for empowering the Bajo people are: (1) indigenous knowledge; that is, the indigenous knowledge and skills inherited from their ancestors from generation to generation in the form of knowledge of natural phenomenon, marine biota environment, sea water environment, catching fish traditional technology, and life skills such as plaiting and fish processing; (2) the Bajo ethics can be seen from their philosophy, that is, "*Papu manak ita lino bake isi-isina kita naja manusiana mamikiria bhatanga kole'na mangelonna*". The meaning is that God has submitted the earth and what it contains to human beings. We are just supposed to think about how to manage them. The Bajo people refer to four principles known as 4D when working. They are *pindara wuto* (Being Self Conscious), *taami wuto* (Self Endurance), *parasaeya wuto* (Self-esteem) and *patappa wuto* (Self confidence).
2. Based on what has been identified and interpreted as far as the local genius owned by the Bajo people is concerned, two strategies can be formulated to empower the Bajo community. They are (1) the utilization of their indigenous knowledge as the strategy of empowerment. In this strategy, their knowledge, local genius and natural resources available in their geographical surrounding are used as the basic capital for empowering them through guidance and training; (2) the function of *rarambanga*, as the traditional organization of the Bajo people, should be

revitalized. What is meant by this strategy is that individuals are directed in such a way that they are involved in productive group activities. Then, the groups created are organized into a bigger group, which is expected to be the initial legal financial establishment in the village which may be in the form of either a cooperative or a village bank.

3. The utilization of the local genius as the socio cultural capital for empowering the Bajo ethnic group living in the coastal area is supported by several factors such as (1) availability of the marine resources and the coast around the area where they live; (2) the local organizations and the other cultural values are still in existence in the Bajo community; (3) being supported by the government and community. Apart from the supporting factors, there are also obstructing factors such as (1) capitalistic economic transformation which has been taking place in the Bajo societal life at Bajo *Bungin* Village; (2) there has been a cultural collision between them and the mainland community; (3) their low quality human resources; (4) the policy applied by the government has been less accommodative. The meanings of utilization of the local genius as the socio cultural capital for empowering the community are as follows. (1) Cultural preservation, that is, the Bajo people have attempted to preserve their traditional culture and to maintain their traditional life in such a way that they serve as the collective identity of the Bajo community; (2) Empowerment meaningfulness, that is, their position is developed, made independent and strengthened so that they will be able to be economically, socially and culturally independent.

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