

Harvesting Rice, Caring for lumbung, Keeping Traditions

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I visited Bayan District at the end of January 2022—about four years after 2018, when the 7.5 Richter scale earthquake almost flattened the entire housing settlement. The district, which is 41 kilometers from the capital of North Lombok, was still cool even though the afternoon sun was shining brightly. Especially in Karang Bajo Village, which is a valley with fertile and moist soil. Instantly my fatigue after driving for approximately three hours from Mataram City quickly melted away.

Karang Bajo is one of five hamlets in Karang Bajo Village. This is where the Bayan Indigenous people live. They make settlements with an almost uniform and unpretentious character. The houses of the local culture (*adat*) handed down over centuries, stand neatly in a row and exude harmony.

From my visits to several members of the Indigenous community here, they all welcomed me and led me to a building without walls in front, at the sides, or behind. The area was approximately 4 x 1.5 meters. There were six wooden posts, and they gave it a roof of reeds or tin. The base is finely shaved pieces of bamboo. They named it *berugaq saka* “*berugaq sakenem*,” or so it sounds when you say it fast.

If we look behind the house, another building slightly towers akin to a wooden house on stilts, although not as *berugaq*. This building consists of four large pillars supporting an enclosed space with woven bamboo walls and a thatched roof. In some communal houses, the building stands alone, but in some, the lower part is used as a cowshed. This towering building is called *geleng* or *lumbung*.

Residential houses, *berugaq saka enam*, and *geleng*: these three components dominate the character of the buildings where the Bayan Indigenous people live. All three play important roles in various aspects of their lives—economic, social, religious, and cultural aspects.

“We are obliged to have *lumbung* and *berugaq saka enam*. They play the roles of custom and religion in our society,” Riko explained to me. This young man whose full name is Raden Riko Agustian is part of the young generation who is proud of his Indigenous identity. Together with some of his friends, he drives literacy in his village. From our conversation, it was revealed that this 21-year-old man would graduate in three days from a university in Mataram City.

“That house is where we live, *berugaq* is where we receive guests and carry out various rituals, as well as our *lumbung* for storing our hair rice (javanica rice),” explained the chief, one of the oldest customary elders responsible for leading rituals. This chief, Amaq Riajim, has been a chief for 15 years. In his twilight years—he is 85 years old and was born in 1937—he had the name Ratmanom when he was young. It was from him that I mined stories of various rituals carried out by this Indigenous community, complete with its meanings.

The harvest period is the time to prepare to refill the *geleng* or *lumbung*. And between before and after harvesting, or moving the harvest into the *lumbung*, there are rituals that must be performed. From the explanations of several residents I interviewed, including the chief, the conclusion was that rituals always accompany the entire agricultural production process of the Bayan Indigenous people.

“When farming, we perform three kinds of rituals which we call *ngaji makam*: first, we perform the ritual of the *tama megawe*. Second, after the plants are two months old, there is another ritual called *tunas tamba*, praying for the plants to be protected from pests. Third, after harvesting, we recite the *ngaturang ula kaya*, give thanks, or express gratitude for a successful harvest,” explained the *penghulu* at length to me.

Ngaji makam is held in the Bayan Beleg Ancient Mosque area, a site that is said to be the oldest mosque in Lombok. This mosque is equipped with five other buildings covered in bamboo containing the tombs of those who were responsible for the proliferation of Islam in this place and their followers. “This mosque was renovated in 1992–1993, but guests or tourists were allowed entry before that,” Palasari, the man who guards the Ancient Mosque, told me. “The mosques and tombs here have been around since the 16th century,” the man who has been guarding this ancient mosque since 1993, continued.

Many Indigenous community members participate in *ngaji makam*. Later, small rituals will be performed in each *berugaq*. For rituals during and after harvesting, *berugaq* and *geleng* will play a role.

For example, when the harvest is ready to be taken and put into the barn, the next ritual is carried out: *selamat geleng*. “Essentially, the harvest can not be consumed before going through the process of entering the *lumbung* first,” the chief highlighted.

In the process of *selamat geleng*, the chief continued, men, and women share tasks. The men look after the process of transporting the javanica rice and are near the *nggang* area, the women are in charge of the *pedangan* or kitchen area.

For the record, only certain kinds of rice are placed inside *lumbung*, namely javanica rice. This rice, which is one of the subspecies of Asian rice cultivation with a tail at the end of the grain, has to be planted every year, in addition to other unhulled rice that uses pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

“Here we plant harvest javanica rice and grain rice three times. However, we only include javanica or local rice. Why local rice? Because other types of rice have been stained with dirt and trampled on. So only javanica rice is considered sacred,” stated the chief.

Before unhulled rice that uses pesticides and chemical fertilizers is planted and cared for, the javanica is a must for the community to plant, both for daily consumption and for storage in the *lumbung*. Well, because nowadays people have been introduced to unhusked rice since the 70s, it doesn't mean that javanica has been eliminated. It is still maintained because it is not only a food ingredient but also a “medium” to preserve customs.

“Now, fertilizers and medicinal plants are for sale. There used to be none. We now continue to carry out these rituals,” explained the chief.

Javanica and unhusked rice go hand in hand in meeting the food needs of Indigenous peoples. “So hair rice is only taken out during times of crisis,” explained the chief.

Then why does this customary tradition with regard to agriculture continue to be sustainable? The answer, as explained at length by the chief to me, lies in the basic values of custom that are taught by the elders and are steadfastly held by members of the Indigenous community.

Too many "outsiders" misunderstand the attitude and behavior of the Bayan Indigenous people. Various stigmas were placed upon them, the harshest ranging from "deviating from the true Islamic tradition," to being judged for "only doing three daily prayers or praying three times a day." The younger generation are targets of bullying when dealing with friends from outside the region.

"I often experience that stigma. But I just think positive," Riko told me. This 21-year-old man has just graduated from his bachelor's studies. Several young people of Riko's generation told me they had the same experience.

Riko and several of his friends whom I interviewed expertly explained to me the customary values they follow. Their pride in having an Indigenous identity was evident when they spoke. "Because we were instilled with traditional values since childhood. Just look now, whenever there is a customary activity, young people are heavily involved," explained Riko again.

But I got a more detailed explanation from the chief. From his lengthy explanation, the root of the problem and traditional values are actually laid out clearly. "Custom and religion are not separate things for us," the *penghulu* began his explanation. "Those two things are indeed the tip of the base of misunderstandings."

The *penghulu* said that the custom for the Bayan Indigenous people is the sunnah of the Prophet himself. The Prophet he meant was of course the Prophet Muhammad PBH. The sunnah of the Prophet, continued the chief, spans birth to death. "There are seven sunnahs of the prophets. First, cut the umbilical cord. Second, *buang au* or its literal meaning of "name-making" for newborns after eight days old. Third, *mengkuris* or cut the first hair after approximately three months. Fourth, *khitan* or circumcision after the age of seven. Fifth, *baleq (akil balig)*, which in the customary language here is called *merosog*, that is, when boys grow manek (adam's apple) and girls grow breasts. Sixth, marriage. Seventh, death," the chief explained smoothly.

In carrying out the seven sunnahs of the Prophet, the chief further elaborated various series of rituals. What is obligatory for sunnah? "What is obligatory is the five daily prayers, fasting, Eid al-Fitr, and the birthday of the Prophet or the Prophet's customary birthday, 12 Rabiulawal," replied the chief.

So that answer is enough to refute misunderstandings of many outsiders about the thoughts and behaviors of the Bayan Indigenous people. Indigenous people do not carry out practices that deviate from religion, in fact they also perform the five daily prayers just like the teachings of Islam.

There is another well-known term in the context of the Bayan Indigenous people: *Wetu Telu*. This is a concept that continues to be discussed and debated. It is from this concept that the phrase "Time of Three" comes from which roughly translates to the three daily prayers.

"*Wetu Telu* is not a custom, not a religion, not a sunnah, nor is it an obligatory question," the chief stated, clarifying many people's assumptions of the concept. "*Wetu*," he continued, "means 'to appear,' and '*telu*' means 'three.'"

"Man exists in three realms: the unseen realm, the worldly realm, and the afterlife. Our name in the supernatural is *nur rokhmat*. In the worldly realm, our name is *insan*. In the afterlife, our name is *ar-ruh*. This is *wetu telu*. *Wetu Telu* is concerned with three things that fill the natural world: growing, laying eggs, and giving birth. Growing is experienced by plants. Egg laying is experienced by animals. While giving birth is experienced by humans and some animals," he explained clearly and in detail.

So, *Wetu Telu* is a kind of philosophy of life for the Bayan Indigenous people. Guidance for how to view living beings and the nature in which they live. *Wetu Telu* is about where living things come from: growing, laying eggs, and giving birth. "Let me ask you, is there another way for living beings in this world to enter apart from those three ways?" he asked me. I shook my head, precisely because I agreed.

This philosophical value then encourages various ritual practices in aspects of the life of the Bayan Indigenous people thus far, such as in the work of planting, maintaining, harvesting, and sharing crops.

However, the chief and some members of the Bayan Indigenous community acknowledge there is a change in understanding and maintaining customs among the younger generation. Especially with today's increasingly massive tourism activity—despite a short pause during this pandemic. They do not deny that customary values have been slightly eroded, customary practices have been mildly adjusted, and there are also people who have abandoned customary values and practices, although the numbers are not significant.

"Traditional events in the form of post-harvest rituals are still popular here," Riko said to me.

Mahmi feels that there may be a positive change. In her 30s, she says that there are already several traditional leaders who have begun to provide space for women to move more freely, for example attending schools outside the district. "In the past, it was not recommended for women to leave the village area," she said.

Mahmi admitted that her own family is no longer so strict when it comes to carrying out traditional practices, such as regularly planting rice and performing various rituals. However, she asserted that they never abandoned communal traditional rituals. "Maintaining customs is maintaining our essence and identity," she said.

Mahmi recites her journey to find out traditional values. The freshest thing in her memory was when she asked a traditional elder about *Wetu Telu*. The answer surprised her a little, "Don't bring up old wounds."

This is the old wound in question: the Bayan Indigenous people since colonial times have been at war with those who want Islamic puritanism. Then during the Old Order, the *Wetu Telu* group—as they were labeled—was protected by

the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), while those who opposed *Wetu Telu* were under the auspices of the Masyumi Party.

When Soeharto took power with his militarism, the Old Order collapsed. PKI was dissolved, the Bayan Indigenous people were affected, and political discrimination against them began.

It was a pity I missed the post-harvest ritual. However, I was rewarded with a green view of vast rice paddy fields stretched out in front of me while walking to the south of the village. The green scenery was rice that had just been planted. The planting season had just happened here.

When I was about to go home to Mataram by riding my motorbike slowly, I was greeted with smiles by several community members who were standing on the side of the road. Then I remembered the words of the chief the day before, "The customs in most other places in North Lombok have died. Now they are alone. If you are hungry, you bear it by yourself. We still have the *lumbung*," he said.

Those words took my mind back to 2018 when I volunteered to help after the big earthquake that devastated this district. I could see how chaotic the atmosphere was at that time. People were hungry, some had stopped transporting logistics vehicles, and the issues of ethnicity, religion, race and across groups also haunted aid distribution. However, at the same time, this is what I encountered in Bayan: people repairing their traditional houses, women working in the kitchen, then after that, they gathered together to discuss the possibility of bringing the contents of the *lumbung* down to deal with hunger.