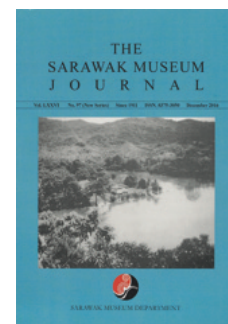




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### THE RELEVANCE OF DURKHEIM'S THEORY FOR UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIOUS LIVES OF PUNAN BAH

**Angelane Mula anak Bunyau and Mohd Effindi bin Samsudin**

#### ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to explain the essence of religion based on Emile Durkheim's theory in his book entitled *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, (1912). Durkheim (1858-1917) an eminent sociologist, was born on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1858 in Louraine, France. His works also focused on social facts of the daily lives of a community, including *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Suicide* (1897) and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912). The Punan Bah is a community who live in the rural areas of Sungai Rajang, Belaga, Sarawak. Similar to other rural communities in the region, the Punan Bah profess the same religion and traditional beliefs known as Bungan. The religious practices of this community, may conform to the theory proposed by Durkheim.

Durkheim's observations are very relevant for studying the religious lives of the Punan Bah as there are many similarities between the origins of their primitive religion' with the aboriginals in the rural parts of Australia. This is also because of the influence from the Bungan as the main traditional religion compared to the ones before known as *pesavie*. This recognition shows how religion plays an important role in the lives of the Punan Bah. The teachings of the Bungan also showed how simple, clear and orderly its influences are, as can be seen in the ways they apply it to their everyday lives.

At the same time, the unique representation of the Bungan Punan Bah conforms closely to Durkheim's concept of totemism. According to Durkheim, totemism is a form of belief, also a primitive religion, which involves the mystical relationship between human beings and the animals or plants of choice in the surrounding habitat. In this respect then, totemism is a collective ideology, a symbol to the community and not something individualistic. Totemism, as outlined by Durkheim is also clearly manifested in the lives of the religious community of Bungan Punan Bah.



# THE RELEVANCE OF DURKHEIM'S THEORY FOR UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIOUS LIVES OF PUNAN BAH

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## Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explain the essence of religion based on Emile Durkheim's theory in his book entitled *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, (1912). Durkheim (1858-1917) an eminent sociologist, was born on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1858 in Louraine, France. His works also focused on social facts of the daily lives of a community, including *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Suicide* (1897) and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912). The Punan Bah is a community who live in the rural areas of Sungai Rajang, Belaga, Sarawak. Similar to other rural communities in the region, the Punan Bah profess the same religion and traditional beliefs known as *Bungan*. The religious practices of this community, may conform to the theory proposed by Durkheim.

Durkheim's observations are very relevant for studying the religious lives of the Punan Bah as there are many similarities between the origins of their primitive religion<sup>1</sup> with the aboriginals in the rural parts of Australia. This is also because of the influence from the *Bungan* as the main traditional religion compared to the ones before known as *pesavie*. This recognition shows how religion plays an important role in the lives of the Punan Bah. The teachings of the *Bungan* also showed how simple, clear and orderly its influences are, as can be seen in the ways they apply it to their everyday lives.

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Although some of Punan Bah community have chosen to embrace Christianity or Islam, the influence of their traditional beliefs are still



strong in their lives. This is shown in their involvement in celebrating the Bungan festivals. The very existence of the few key individuals knowledgeable in the teachings and practicality of Bungan contributed to the documentation of this study.

This paper is based on a fieldwork conducted by the researcher who stayed and celebrated the Bungan festivals with the Punan Bah in 2014. The writing of the paper drew much on the researcher's observation, as well as interview sessions with prominent figures and villagers of Punan Bah. Apart from this, the information gathered was also taken from several secondary sources, as well as some written works related to this topic.

## INTRODUCTION

Durkheim (1912); Swain (1915), classified religion<sup>2</sup> as 'a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things...that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – belief and practices which unite into one single moral community called church all those who adhere to them'. Religion is a system of beliefs and practices, associated with sacred things. For example, things that are set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices that have been integrated into a single moral community called the church or the congregation. Durkheim also mentioned that the people are the ones who determine the form of religion they consider appropriate for their lives and culture.

Researching into the origins of the primitive religion of the aboriginals in rural Australia, Durkheim considered that the community was one of the 'purest' he has encountered. Durkheim then conceived the idea that godliness is a reflection of the society, holding on to the fact that they are 'pure' and 'of unity'. This is due to the fact that they are made up of a segmental society, a community closely knitted by 'common solidarity' or in other words an integration of mechanical and 'relatively isolated' divisions, independently or dependently (Taufik 1986). Durkheim believed that having a simple approach to primitive religion<sup>3</sup> will facilitate understanding, without the influence and distortions of complex modern elements.

Durkheim stressed that there should be a few important items constituting a religion. Firstly it should have a system or a clear rule to distinguish between things that are sacred and those profane. Durkheim emphasized that a human relationship is formed from two distinct elements, opposite of each other (Evan-Pritchard 1987). Things sacred refer to those



elements considered 'pure' or 'holy' in other religions. On the other hand, 'profane' refers to what is done for earthly purposes. Therefore, there must be a responsible person or institution in the existing society who maintains and analyses the theories of 'sacred' matters and at the same time distinguishes it from things profane.

Next, there should be a holy or religious act to differentiate the sacred from earthly things which should be conducted or affirmed and through religious rituals in society. This will create the values and morality of the society, at the same time demarcating and identifying the sacred and profane things in their everyday life. Among the Punan Bah, *Guro-Guro Bungan* constitutes the religious circle responsible for officiating the religious rites, especially during the Bungan ceremony. This Bungan ceremony is the ritual or better known as the medium resorted to by the Bungans to communicate with or pray to their gods.

The Bungan Punan Bah too have a religious institution or a special ritual centre known as *lasan*, a site used to unite the community. Together they carry out the Bungan ritual or better known as '*bebungan*', led by one of the *Guro Bungan*. After the completion of every religious ritual in the *lasan*, the villagers will head together to another location known as the *batu dong* house to end the entire ritual. This *batu dong* house is regarded as a pure and sacred place, as it is believed to be the site where their ancestral spirits gather.

The Bungan Punan Bah also believe that there are natural elements that are considered pure, in line with Durkheim's notion of totemism<sup>4</sup> in religion. Durkheim assumed that the rough living conditions of the aboriginals reflect an older way of life. In this respect, the totem was used as a sacred symbol for the society itself. Members of the society will gather around the totem just like the aboriginals in Australia. In doing so, each and every member of society have indirectly subscribed to this sentiment, establishing a strong bond among themselves (Edward 1997).

The Bungan Punan Bah believe totems such as *rumah batu dong* and *kelirieng*, creatures such as pythons and tigers, as well as plants like bamboos are all sacred and should be revered. Accordingly totems created upon the motifs of pythons and tigers are accorded sacral status in the local folklores. These motifs have also been reflected in many of the tools for handicraft. It is important to note that tools with tiger motifs are for the use of royalties only. Totems of *batu dong* house and bamboo motifs are generally used in ritual ceremonies by the Bungans.



The main focus of this paper is the totemic use of bamboo in the Bungan Punan Bah celebrations. Bamboo is widely used as a sacred object to connect with the spirits. In order to communicate with the spirits certain rituals or ceremonies had to be performed. It is very important for them to differentiate the use of bamboo, whether for sacred or for worldly things. In the vicinity of the village, there is an abundance of bamboo along the riverbanks of Rajang or Bah river. For worldly ends, the Punan Bah utilised bamboos for building construction and decorations, as well as for household chores and as materials for various handicrafts and making of musical instruments.

The Bungan celebration is organised annually by all Punan communities especially in Sarawak as thanksgiving at the end of the harvesting season. In Sarawak, the Punans can be classified under several groupings, which include Punan Biau, Punan Sama, Punan Pedan, Punan Jelalung, Punan Kakus, Punan Tepaling and also Punan Bah. The names of these groups are those of different places, such as rivers, and the names do not reflect differences among them. All Punan tribes in Sarawak share the same culture, language and annual celebrations, which are conducted in the same way and for the same purpose, though celebrated in their own locations.

### **Punan Bah Community**

Punan Bah is the name of the community, as well as the name of the village located on the upper reach of the Rajang River in the district of Belaga, Sarawak. The Punan Bah settlement is located between the upper streams of Rajang and Bah river, where the Bah River is a tributary that flows into the Rajang river. The Punan Bah are also known as Punan Ba after the Ba River, or Long Ba. The word '*long*' here means estuary of Ba River. Both the word 'Bah' and 'Ba' refer to the same community as an entity. The choice of name or identification adopted in any write-up depends very much on the usages of the author.

Even though the communal settlement is located between two rivers, the name 'Punan Bah' is still widely retained. This is due to their historical origins in the upper streams of the Bah River. The existence of Punan Bah today can be traced back to the ancestral migration of the olden days. The final stop of their migration was by the river bank of Rajang. At that locality they decided communally to establish a permanent settlement, which had lasted to this day.