
SPACE AND MEANING: SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION OF BOAT IN BAJAU DWELLING CULTURE IN SAINOA ISLAND, SALABANGKA ARCHIPELAGO

Ikram

Doctor of Architecture
School of Architecture, Planning,
and Development Policy
Bandung Institute of Technology
Ikramyap1996@gmail.com

Indah Widiastuti

Department of Architecture
School of Architecture, Planning,
and Development Policy
Bandung Institute of Technology
indah@itb.ac.id

Mohammad Zaini Dahlan

Department of Landscape Architecture
School of Architecture, Planning,
and Development Policy
Bandung Institute of Technology
mzd19@itb.ac.id

Nuning Yanti Damayanti

Department of Art and Design
Faculty of Art and Design
Bandung Institute of Technology
nydamayanti10@gmail.com

Ignatius Bambang Sugiharto

Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Philosophy
Parahyangan Catholic University
ibam@unpar.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine how the Bajau dwelling culture is maintained through the continuity and transformation of spatial symbolic structures derived from boat-based life. This study employs a qualitative interpretative approach to explore the Bajau dwelling culture through spatial symbolic analysis. The analysis includes: (1) Identifying spatial elements derived from boat structures; (2) Interpreting their symbolic meanings; and (3) Examining how these elements are maintained or transformed in permanent residences. Findings of this study reveal that the symbolic meaning of the boat in the Bajau dwelling culture has transformed over time. The boat is no longer understood solely as a house or means of transportation, but also functions in festival performances, tourism support, transportation, and contemporary art as a representation of Bajau identity. The transformation of Bajau dwelling culture is influenced by several factors, including sociological demands, education, government relocation proposals, social interactions with land-based communities, and modernization. However, despite the modernization of dwelling forms and materials Bajau on Sainoa Island, the symbolic structure of the boat remains embedded in the domestic spatial configuration. The spatial hierarchy is still recognizable in both sea- and land-based houses: the bow is the front room, the middle room is the family room and resting area, and the stern is the kitchen.

KEYWORDS: Bajau boat, dwelling culture, living space, transformation

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana budaya bermukim masyarakat Bajau melalui kontinuitas dan transformasi struktur spasial simbolis yang berasal dari kehidupan berbasis perahu. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan interpretatif kualitatif untuk mengeksplorasi budaya bermukim masyarakat Bajau melalui analisis spasial simbolik. Analisis yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini meliputi: (1) mengidentifikasi elemen spasial yang berasal dari struktur perahu; (2) menginterpretasikan makna simboliknya; dan (3) memeriksa bagaimana elemen-elemen ini dipelihara atau diubah dalam tempat tinggal permanen. Temuan dari penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa simbol perahu dalam budaya permukiman Bajau telah mengalami transformasi makna. Hal ini dibuktikan dengan perubahan makna perahu yang tidak lagi hanya sebagai rumah atau alat transportasi, tetapi juga digunakan untuk pertunjukan festival, dukungan pariwisata, transportasi, dan seni kontemporer sebagai representasi masyarakat Bajau. Transformasi budaya bermukim Bajau dipengaruhi oleh faktor-faktor berikut: (1) tuntutan sosiologis, (2) pendidikan, (3) usulan relokasi pemerintah, (4) interaksi sosial dengan masyarakat berbasis lahan, dan (5) modernisasi. Meskipun demikian, terlepas dari modernisasi bentuk dan material tempat tinggal Bajau di Pulau Sainoa, struktur simbolik perahu tetap tertanam dalam konfigurasi spasial domestik. Hierarki spasial masih dapat dikenali, baik pada hunian di laut maupun di darat: haluan adalah ruang depan, ruang tengah adalah ruang keluarga dan tempat istirahat, dan buritan adalah dapur.

KATA KUNCI: perahu Bajau, budaya bermukim, ruang hidup, transformasi

INTRODUCTION

The Bajau people are a sea people who live nomadically at sea, with the aim of seeking marine resources from one island to another. In their lives, boats are a very important part, not only as a means of transportation, but as a "home", a place to be born, work, and marry, even die on the boat. Geographically, the Bajau people are spread over a wide area, stretching right across the Sulu Archipelago in the Southern Philippines, also known as (Ba(d)jao) in Sabah (Malaysia), the east coast of Indonesia, such as in Kalimantan (Bajau or Bajo), the island of Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara, and southern Maluku (Bajo) (Lenhart, 1995). According to Nagatsu (2017), the distribution of the Bajau people and their ethnic formation is a socio-cultural ecosphere of Southeast Asia that is closely tied through the ocean. Geographically, this region consists of the Southeast Asian islands and the adjacent coasts of the Southeast Asian continent, such as the region (Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia), and is formed by the ecological environment of the maritime world, namely an archipelago that is mostly characterized by tropical seas and rainforests.

The Bajau people demonstrate a very close relationship with the sea. For them, the sea is not only a place to live, but also has deep moral meaning and connects them with other sea people. The sea is the center of their lives and knowledge, while land becomes the periphery and empty space (Sather, 2024). The Bajau people's habitat is closely related to certain marine environments, especially coral reefs (Sather, 2024; Sopher, 1977). The Bajau people depend on the sea, especially on shallow coastal waters, to meet their daily needs (Supriyono et al., 2020). For the Bajau people, the ocean is land because there is no separation between land and water; they can play an integral role in coral reef conservation because they consider the sea their home (Djohani, 1996; Tim Ekskursi Wakatobi, 2013).

The Bajau people are an ethnic group that mostly lives in coastal areas and sea waters. As a community whose livelihood is highly dependent on the sea, they are one of the groups most affected by social, economic, and political changes in coastal areas. This is due to their traditions that have been formed over centuries, where the survival and identity of the Bajau culture are largely determined by the availability and access to fishing grounds, which are their main source of livelihood (Ismail et al., 2015). According to Jubilado (2010), several aspects of the cultural order bind and unite the diverse Bajau people. However, political and economic boundaries create a sense of separation among the Bajau groups themselves that belies evidence of a shared culture. Government efforts to relocate marine dwellings with more effective planning have only succeeded in adapting to the new

environment, and then they return to coastal areas (Ismail et al., 2015).

The Bajau people have evolved their way of life from nomadic to settled. Initially, they lived on boats called Soppe. Sociological demands made the Bajau people start building houses on water and on land. Various cultures occur in every main component of the boat space, such as customs, culture, and beliefs; these activities are factors that influence the function of the boat space. Environmental factors, cosmology, modernization, socialization, and the evolution of the times also influence the filling of the meaning of space on the main boat of the Bajau people (Amelia & Wigdado, 2015; Sahibil, 2019). During their voyages, they will build temporary buildings known as Sapao or Babaroh. These temporary dwellings are used for shelter during strong sea waves or to repair the boat (Mulyati, 2015; Zacot, 2002).

The Bajau people are currently facing the challenges of modernization. Their interactions with land-based communities are slowly eroding their knowledge of maritime navigation, and their dwellings are shifting to land. These changes in living space are not only physical but also touch upon symbolic and epistemological dimensions. The boat, which was once a symbol of existence and identity, is now undergoing a transformation of meaning within the context of land space. This study is important to understand how the Bajau people reinterpret the symbol of the boat in their dwelling culture, and how this transformation reflects the process of negotiation between tradition and modernity within the framework of a post-traditional society.

Previous research on Bajau dwellings and architecture has focused on dwelling transformation, dwelling typology, and socio-cultural adaptation. Limited research has examined how symbolic spatial structures embedded in boat culture are transformed and maintained in contemporary Bajau dwellings. However, little attention has been paid to interpreting these transformations within a post-traditional cultural framework. This study does not aim to examine Bajau dwellings as physical entities, but rather to understand the Bajau people's dwelling culture through the continuity and transformation of symbolic spatial structures derived from their boat-based life. Therefore, this paper seeks to uncover how the Bajau maintain the continuity of their identity and the meaning of their living space amidst increasingly complex changes in the world.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach to explore the dwelling culture of the Bajau people through symbolic spatial analysis. The research is grounded in field observations conducted in Sainoa

Island for one month between June and August 2025, supported by relevant literature to interpret the cultural and symbolic meanings of space. The field data are not intended to constitute a comprehensive ethnographic study, but rather to provide empirical grounding for interpreting spatial continuity from boat life to settled dwellings. According to Creswell (2014), a literature study is a writing that summarizes various sources, such as journals, books, and other documents that contain important information from the past to the present related to the research topic. This study focuses on the traditions and local knowledge of the Bajau people by considering the maritime characteristics of the Bajau as a seafaring society.

The analysis used in this study includes: (1) Identifying spatial elements derived from the boat structure; (2) Interpreting their symbolic meaning; and (3) Examining how these elements are maintained or transformed in permanent residences.

The research location is Sainoa Island, South Bungku District, Morowali Regency, Central Sulawesi Province, which is part of the Salabangka Islands Archipelago (figure 1). Sainoa Island is home to the largest Bajau population in the Salabangka Islands.



Figure 1. Research Location Map
(Source: Author's Document, 2025)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Context and the Continuity of Bajau Dwelling Culture

In the context of post-traditional societies, cultural identity is not static, but rather continuously negotiated and transformed along with social, economic, and environmental dynamics. According to Sugiharto (2019), cultural groups generally function more as a kind of "association" than a separate society. In urban life, different groups borrow and adopt elements from each other's cultures and shape them according to their respective interests. Furthermore, social groupings are generally formed more on the basis of shared interests, rather than based on culture, religion, race, and so on. This is further supported by Sun & Wang (2023), who argue that the interaction between traditional local culture

and modern culture can achieve mutually beneficial cultural formation, reorganization, and renewal through adaptation and its impact.

In this context, the Bajau people, as an indigenous community, have the opportunity to preserve and develop their own culture. However, this cultural self-determination does not prevent change or adaptation, even assimilation and integration, as long as the change is voluntary and the inherited traditions have the opportunity to survive in the hearts and minds of indigenous peoples (Wiessner, 2011). Historically, they are known as seafaring people, where boats are an important part of their daily lives. Nowadays, Bajau architecture and dwellings have faced various forms of transformation, starting from a nomadic life using houseboats to a settled life on land.

In this study, instead of considering the existence of opposing forces between tradition and modernity, the researchers place this major challenge in a neutral direction. Therefore, this study interpreted it as a process of negotiation between tradition and modernity, where the Bajau community not only survives but also actively forms new knowledge about themselves. As mentioned by Sock (2024), negotiation is a dynamic process of indigenous communities to find a balance between modern tools, including digital media and formal education, with the norms that unite their ancestors to maintain identity and cohesion.

Field observations in Saiona indicate that Bajau dwellings continue to reflect spatial principles derived from boat-based living. This suggests that the transformation toward settled living is not merely a physical shift, but a reinterpretation of cultural and spatial identity. Within this context of cultural negotiation, the boat becomes a crucial reference point for understanding how spatial meanings are formed and sustained in Bajau dwelling culture.

The Boat as an Epistemic and Symbolic Spatial System

According to Jumsai (1989), in general, there are only two types of civilization on earth, the first is based on the use of materials that can be drawn, which is the result of aquatic skills and survival instincts and the second is the use of compacted materials, such as technology and the built environment which is highly dependent on stones quarried from mountains and other complementary compressible materials. Seafaring communities spread across Southeast Asia and even to Polynesia have a strong maritime culture, they are highly dependent on natural and marine conditions.

This study begins with the understanding that boats are not merely artifacts of the past, but epistemic fields that record the Bajau people's reflection process in negotiating tradition and modernity. According to Sugiharto (2019), essentially, modernity brings a "logic of negation" or "logic of

novelty," and it forces cultural traditions to reformulate and reinterpret their philosophies into new frameworks of meaning, new demands, and new opportunities. This process will give rise to unexpected branches of meaning or may even change the central values of a culture. In post-traditional conditions, the symbolic transformation of Bajau boats becomes a window to understand how local knowledge lives, adapts, and re-represents itself in new land spaces.

Previous studies (Amelia & Wigdado, 2015; Amloy & Inpung, 2020; Arunotai, 2014; Bintana et al., 2020; Ryn, 2016; Sumarlim, 1989; Suryantini et al., 2023; Van Tilburg, 2001; Zacot, 2002) show that housing forms derived from boat cultures tend to retain maritime values, symbolic meanings, and spatial principles even after transitioning into land-based structures.

Field observations in Saiona suggest that the spaces formed within the Bajau dwellings are implementations of the boat spaces they use while sailing. Thus, the continuity of Bajau dwelling culture lies not only in preserving the physical form of the boat, but in maintaining its symbolic spatial logic. This conceptual understanding of the boat as a symbolic spatial system can be further observed in how its spatial elements are transformed in contemporary Bajau dwellings.

Transformation of Spatial Elements in Bajau Dwellings

The transformation from boat-based living to settled dwellings involves not only physical changes but also shifts in spatial configuration, material use, and functional adaptation. In this study, transformation is understood as a process shaped by ongoing negotiations between tradition and modernity. As noted by McNiven (2024), negotiation provides a concrete path for indigenous communities to respond to external pressures while maintaining their cultural identity, such as through agreements, benefit sharing, joint decision-making processes, and specific measures to avoid or address negative impacts. In architectural contexts, these negotiations are characterized by the preservation of cultural values and ambitions and the incorporation of the latest technology while maintaining the spirit of traditional design concepts. This serves as a counterbalance to global or institutional institutions, emphasizing the importance of local knowledge, customs, and practices in maintaining cultural distinctiveness and identity (Alnaim, 2025). For instance, contemporary construction practices often prioritize efficiency and affordability, leading communities to adopt modern materials that are technically easier and lower cost, gradually reducing reliance on inherited traditional customs (Widaningsih & Diah Cahyani, 2016).

Field observations in Sainoa indicate that the transformations of Bajau dwellings can be identified through three main aspects observed in Sainoa: (1) spatial configuration – the linear arrangement derived from boat structure remains evident in both sea-based and land-based dwellings, (2) functional continuity – preservation of social and domestic activities within specific spatial zones, (3) material adaptation – shift toward modern construction materials such as concrete, zinc roofing, and processed timber, which are adopted in response to economic and environmental considerations. Nevertheless, the persistence of spatial organization suggests that transformation operates as a process of reinterpretation rather than replacement.

These broader transformations observed in Sainoa are consistent with previous studies. Sociological demands have made the Bajau people start building houses on water and houses on land. Various cultures occur in every main component of the boat space, such as customs, culture, and beliefs. Research conducted by Ardhyanto & Dewanker (2019) revealed that coastal reclamation and tourism have influenced the transformation of Bajau architecture. This transformation resulted in a more complex transition in Bajau architecture, both in terms of materials, forms, public-private hierarchical scales, and territorial changes. Gobang et al. (2018) and Sopher (1977) explain that seafaring communities utilize shallow seas and coastal areas as areas to establish permanent dwellings. As hunter-gatherers of marine resources, their dwelling areas are generally close to rich and diverse marine resources. However, the Bajau dwellings have undergone a transformation, which is also due to the government's proposal to relocate their dwellings from the sea to the mainland. As it developed, the Bajau people began to settle in temporary houses (*Sapao* or *Babaroh*), which are huts with simple construction and materials. Then it developed into three types of houses, namely (1) small-sized tancap houses, made of wooden poles and simple materials, the space under the house is used as a boat mooring, this type is usually occupied by small and less fortunate families; (2) coral houses, which are medium-sized, and are an effort by the community to obtain a more durable and permanent house, the Bajau people make foundations from dead coral and form the front yard of their house which can be used as a communal space; and (3) hanging houses, which are large-sized houses consisting of zinc roofing material, wooden planks and woven bamboo walls, as well as basic coral pieces, generally the building foundation is made of dead coral, except for the kitchen area, which is still attached to the wooden pole foundation on the seabed (Amelia & Wigdado, 2015).

At a deeper level, this transformation is also influenced by the Bajau's cosmological understanding

of space. The ontological view of the Bajau people about understanding the earth and nature universally has existed since ancient times. The Bajau people have a holistic mindset and see everything as a whole. Their traditional houses are greatly influenced by the understanding of the "cosmic structure" where nature is divided into three parts, namely the "upper world", the "middle world", and the "lower world" (Dharma et al., 2018). According to Keng Khoo & Badaruddin (2021), the challenges for the Bajau sea people are the difficulty of clean water and sanitation, as well as vulnerability to fires and rising sea levels, but their strong cosmological (animistic) beliefs cause their tenacity in surviving amidst the many threats to life they face. The Bajau people depend on the sea, especially on shallow coastal waters to meet their daily needs (Supriyono et al., 2020). They show a very close relationship with the sea. For them, the sea is not only a place to live, but also has a deep moral meaning and connects them with other sea people. The sea is the center of Bajau life and knowledge, while land becomes a periphery and empty space (Sather, 2024).

Persistence of Symbolic Spatial Structure and Visual Interpretation of Spatial Transformation

A key aspect of these transformations is the persistence of symbolic spatial structures. According to Santamaria (2019), spatial organization can be understood through two main axes: the social axis and the religious axis. The Bajau living spaces are analogous to the position of the human body lying from the right side to the left side, depicting the "social axis," where there is a main door and a back door that are connected to each other. Meanwhile, the axis from head to foot depicts the "religious axis." Likewise, inside the boat, the "social axis and the religious axis" are in the same position as the Bajau living space (figure 2). The illustration in Figure 2 and the interpretation of social and religious axes were also observed during field observation in Sainoa.

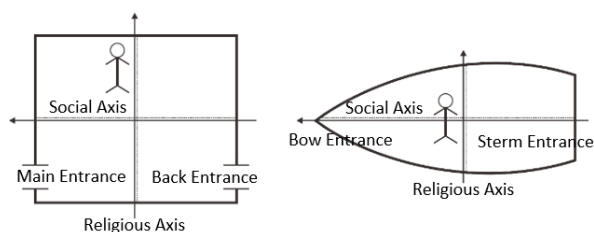


Figure 2. The "Social Axis" and "Religious Axis" in Bajau Dwellings and Boathouses
(Source: Santamaria, 2019)

The Bajau dwelling culture is rooted in and rearticulated from the boats they use. The transformation from a nomadic to a settled lifestyle has changed the meaning of space and building forms

among the Bajau people. Bajau people in Sainoa Island who have settled on land consider houses with modern materials such as concrete walls and zinc roofs to be a symbol of "wealth". Meanwhile, the Bajau people who still live on the sea consider houses as a place for rest and other domestic activities. So their perspective on "wealth" is not indicated by the size of their dwelling, or even how modern the materials they use, but rather the size and sophistication of their boats. However, even though some Bajau people have settled on land, spaces that represent dwellings at sea are still maintained, for example, the back terrace (*galampah*). This space is where social interaction between Bajau people occurs (figure 3). The Bajau people in Sainoa demonstrate the negotiations they have carried out for centuries, since they began settling on land. However, even though they live on land, sea symbols still persist and are practiced in everyday life, especially the symbolism of boats in their architectural spaces.

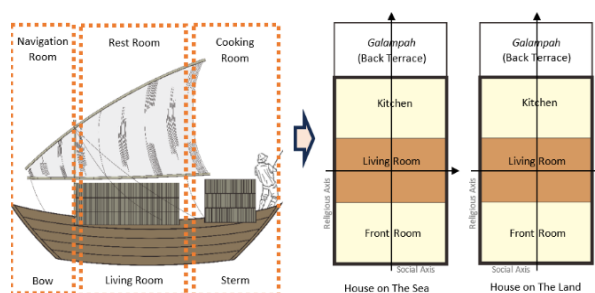


Figure 3. Symbolic Hierarchy of Boat Space to Bajau House Space at Sea and Land in Sainoa Island
(Source: Author's Document, 2025)

While Figure 2 explains the structural logic of symbolic space, Figure 3 demonstrates how this structure is rearticulated across different dwelling contexts, both sea-based and land-based dwellings. The front, middle, and rear spatial arrangement reflects not only functional distribution, but also a symbolic continuity rooted in maritime life. The alignment of entrances, circulation paths, and interior spaces corresponds to social and religious axes illustrated in Figure 2. This indicates that transformation does not eliminate the original spatial logic, but reorganizes it within new physical contexts.

Reflections, Criticism, and Suggestions

Beyond spatial transformation, these findings also reveal broader implications for cultural sustainability and the relationship between the Bajau community and their environment. For the Bajau people, the sea is a central part of their lives and plays a crucial role in various aspects of life. It is as if their life and death depend on the sea. The sea is also considered a mirror of past, present, and future life. The sea is a friend, a path, and a resting place for their ancestors. They

respect and protect the sea to such an extent that it is no exaggeration to call the Bajau people a symbol of the "last line of defense" of the relationship between humans and the sea, living in harmony (Susilowati, 2017). However, the transformation of lifestyle patterns from nomadic to settled, accompanied by a shift from traditional fishing techniques to methods considered more economically profitable (modern), has put increasing pressure on previously abundant marine resources. Economic pressures resulting from lifestyle changes and coastal population growth have encouraged them to use more efficient fishing technologies and produce greater catches. As a result, various shallow marine ecosystems, including coral reefs, have experienced overexploitation by communities that previously lived in harmony with their marine environment (Tomascik et al., 1997).

Nowadays, boats are not only used for transportation, but also appear in festivals, tourism, or contemporary art as a representation of the Bajau. This shows that there has been a commodification of the boat symbol without reducing its original meaning. Nevertheless, efforts to preserve traditions and cultural values continue to be carried out by several Bajau community groups. According to Zainuddin (2023), in his article entitled *"When Tradition Meets Modernity: The Adaptation of Bajau Community in Malaysia Amidst Sociocultural Transformation"*, he explains that adopting creative and innovative methods is the right step to pass on Bajau cultural values to the younger generation. In addition, Sugiharto (2019) also explains that authenticity is when in various transformations, humans are able to re-weave traditions and personal history into new frameworks. Humans are also authentic when they are able to reject various forms of distortion and dare to reveal false consciousness that threatens their conversations towards openness, honesty, and justice.

The Bajau people are a society that openly accepts all forms of modernization. The location of dwellings on the coast and small islands allows them to interact with other communities. Thus, negotiations occur that trigger their cultural transformation, such as replacing wood with fiber materials for boat construction, replacing sails with boat propulsion engines, and changes in residential spaces (both those living at sea and on land). For example, at sea, dwellings are built on stilts and have used modern materials, but the symbolic hierarchy of the boat is still applied to the residential spaces, such as the front room (prow), middle room (family room and resting area), and the stern room (rear room or kitchen). Likewise, dwellings on land are no longer built on stilts and use modern materials, but the hierarchy of the boat's spaces can still be identified, namely the front room (bow), middle room (family room and resting area), and the stern room (rear room or kitchen) (see

picture 3). In addition, Bajau dwellings on land have been separated by a barrier (fence) between one dwelling and another. This shows the negotiations they carried out, therefore, even though they lived on land, they were not sea people who had lost their boat, but people who had learned to find the sea on land.

Within the framework of critical philosophical theories on culture and post-tradition, identity becomes a crucial element in maintaining the existence of marginalized groups, such as the Bajau people. As modernization becomes increasingly inevitable, the Bajau people, who live in maritime landscapes, are often looked down upon by land-based communities, considered backward, slum-like, and uneducated. This view reflects a structural bias that ignores local cultural values. In the context of post-tradition, Bajau identity is not merely an ethnic symbol, but a representation of maritime knowledge rich in local wisdom.

By preserving their cultural identity, we also preserve marine ecosystems. The Bajau people preserve a legacy of knowledge about the sea, navigation, and human migration, which has significantly contributed to Indonesia's history and ecology. Bajau maritime wisdom can be an important source of learning for nature conservation and sustainable marine management. The Bajau believe that the spirits of their ancestors reside within coral reefs, a belief passed down through generations since ancient times. Therefore, when fishing or seeking marine resources, they use very simple tools, thus minimizing damage to coral reefs. This belief needs to be preserved to face the challenges of climate change today. Preserving marine communities like the Bajau means preserving coral reef ecosystems. Bajau culture, in a post-traditional context, does not reject modernization, but rather embraces modernization to create new knowledge by combining the good knowledge of the past with the good knowledge of the present.

CONCLUSION

Based on the studies that have been conducted, it can be concluded that the symbol of the boat in the Bajau dwelling culture in Sainoa Island has undergone a transformation of meaning. This is proven by the change in the meaning of the boat, which is now no longer just a house or a means of transportation, but is also used for festival performances, transportation to support tourism, and contemporary art as a representation of Bajau. The transformation of the Bajau dwelling culture is influenced by various factors, including: (1) sociological demands; (2) education; (3) relocation proposals by the government; (4) social interaction with land communities; and (5) modernization (use of technology).

Their openness to modernization and strategic geographic location on the coast and small islands demonstrates an adaptive cultural dynamic. Intensive interactions with other communities have fostered a negotiation process that has resulted in significant transformations in materials and living spaces, evident in the shift from wood to fiber in boat construction, the replacement of sails with engines to propel boats, and the changing forms of dwellings both at sea and on land. These transformations reflect the Bajau people's ability to respond to changing times without losing their fundamental identity.

Although the form and materials of Bajau dwellings have undergone modernization, the symbolic structure of the boat remains internalized in domestic spatial planning. Spatial hierarchies, such as the bow as the front room, the middle room as a place for family and rest, and the stern as the kitchen, are still recognizable in both sea and land dwellings. Even non-physical symbols, such as the "social axis" as a symbol of human interaction and the "religious axis" as a symbol of interaction between humans and God are still maintained. This phenomenon shows that physical transformation occurs alongside identity negotiations, where the Bajau community continues to maintain symbolic traces of culture in an ever-changing social dynamic.

Maintaining the cultural identity of the Bajau people means not only preserving traditions but also safeguarding the marine ecosystems that are an integral part of their lives. As guardians of a legacy of knowledge about the sea, navigation, and maritime migration, the Bajau play a vital role in Indonesia's local history and ecology. Their inherited maritime wisdom can be a valuable source of learning for nature conservation and sustainable marine environmental management.

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