

Ancient Sailing Scripture of *Sampang Bulan*

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ABSTRACT: *A Bajau ancient sailing scripture owned by a famous Bajau sailor of Sabah called “Kitab Pelayaran Sampang Bulan (Sappit)” was discovered in Bum-Bum Island, Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia in 2009. The scripture is now kept by his great grandchild, Tuan Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong, who is living in Bum-Bum Island. The scripture shows that the Bajau community was definitely the famous sailor of its time in Sabah as well as in the “Dunia Melayu” (Malay World). They had knowledge, understanding and practising tradisional science, and Islamic Mathematics in their daily life. Based on previous studies, the content and the physical form of this scripture show that it is the only ancient sailing guide and also the oldest scripture ever found in the traditional maritime history of Sabah. The scripture and calendar show that Bajau sailors living in islands and coasts of Sabah, before and during the Sulu Sultanate’s era, have already possessed the significant knowledge and understanding on falaq that is outdated according to the Westerners.*

KEY WORDS: *Ancient sailing scripture, Sampang Bulan, Bajau sailors, people science, Islamic Mathematics, and traditional maritime history.*

INTRODUCTION

Before the Westerns invaded the territories of the Archipelago, the sailors of the Malay world had already known, understood, learnt, and practised the Mathematics and Sciences in all aspects of their life and sea activities. Their understanding on the *falaq* (universe) involving various elements of the universe such as moon, sun, stars, winds, rain, clouds, eclipse, storms, strong waves, comet, day becomes night and vice-versa, mountains, sea and others, either it was inherited from their ancestors, experiences and observations – known as “people’s science” by David A. King (1993) – had been applied in their sailings and was known to have “power” in their life. As cited by Baharrudin Zainal as follows:

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When they experienced repeated seasons, they predicted the coming seasons. This prediction was then followed by empirical observation and the focus of these ancient observers was to indicate the reasons for natural incidents. During these observations, elements of universe such as stars, moon, sun and sky's phenomenon had become the objects of their observation. They were amazed by any interesting and phenomenol elements they encountered. For example, during the eclipse, they would feel afraid as the day suddenly changes to night (Baharrudin Zainal, 2002:1).

Geographically, after the end of the great flood, territories in the Malay world were separated into islands that were surrounded by seas. This has indeed limited their movements from one area to another area – before the great flood, they can travel on lands. In order to travel from one island to another island, the people of these Malay islands had no choice but to build boats and become the experts of the seas. Before the arrival of Islam, these ancient sailors, regardless of their beliefs (pagans and Hindu-Buddhist), practised their ancient *falaq* knowledge that they understood from their experiences in sailings, i.e. boats-making technology and sea knowledge, so that it guided them in seas (this is called *Tagaroa* in ancient Malay language) and various fishing, trading, and migration activities.

When Islam came to the Malay world in the 15th century, the sailors' knowledge on sailings and the accuracy of their sailing were enhanced through the application of Islamic astronomy, which were not merely based on experiences but *falaq* elements. According to David A. King (1993), the application of this Islamic knowledge on the sailors' sea calendar had slowly eliminated the ancient sea knowledge that was influenced by myths and superstitions. A more rational sea knowledge (based on Islamic Sciences and Mathematics) was adapted to Islamic months. In other words, the understandings and knowledge of this adapted sea knowledge had enabled them to expand their civilization in the Malay world. To date, there are many theories as to how these sailors, be it from the Malay islands or outside the islands, expanded their civilization in and out of the Malay world.

There are many studies and writings on the Malay's thinking and culture in astronomy. Among them are of Asmah Omar (1986), Mohd Taib Osman (1989), Othman Yatim and Halim Nasir (1990), David A. King (1993), Baharrudin Zainal (2002), and others. According to Baharrudin Zainal (2002), the epistemology of the *falaq* of this community can be divided into two, namely the People's *Falaq* and Mathematical *Falaq*, and these knowledges were practised as one for worldly and eternal needs. According to this epistemology, the *falaq* knowledge will expand as humans striving for life satisfaction try to improve their knowledge about the universe.

In the development of knowledge, the *falaq* has developed from the religion *falaq* to reasoning *falaq*, optical *falaq* and astrophysic's *falaq*. The *falaq* or the Islamic astronomy contains the measurement of time, calendar, the direction of Mecca, *falaq* table, use of sinus or *rubu mujayyab*, and knowledge on Twelve Stars. Among its original contribution are the *dauri* system and *syari' falaq* table for the Malay world such as the prayers' time, direction of Mecca, eclipse phenomenon, and seeing new moon. *Sabil al-Muhtadin* scripture by Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjary is highly regarded in this field. The oldest *falaq* written in Arabic is *Tuhfat az-Zaman* by Ibn Shaddad al-Himyary (1175 AH / 1762 AD) which discusses about seasons, prediction based calendar and syamsiah and qamariah arrangement method's calendar, direction determiner pursued by Islam.

BACKGROUND OF THE SCRIPTURE

During the study of the history and boating tradition of the Bajau sailors, Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong had shown his old sailing scripture that he has inherited from his grandfather, Sampang Bulan bin Unggun, whose wife's name is Santik (Beautiful). According to him, his grandfather, Sampang Bulan, was actually a descendant of Selingaya Bungsu (a Sulu prince) who had sailed from Johor to Sambuanga Island (Zamboanga, the Philipinnes), and later had sailed back to Sabah to finally resided in Omadal Island after he failed in the competition to marry a Johor princess, Siti Zairan Kebaran. He also said that his grandfather was a highly skilled sailor who had high knowledge in sailing and *falaq*. He was also respected by the Bajau people in Kampung Kabimbangan, Bum-Bum Island before they were governed by the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC). To ensure that his knowledge on sailing and *falaq* remained practised, Sampang Bulan had taught his experiences and sailing knowledge verbally to his son named Maharaja Onnong (Hj. Bakara's father).

When Sampang Bulan died, he was buried in Omadal Island, and his son, Maharaja Onnong had taken his place as a sailor as well as the leader of Bajau in Bum-Bum Island. To ensure that this knowledge stays alive, Maharaja Onnong translated Sampang Bulan's experiences and sailing knowledge in a scripture written in Arabic (Arabic and Bajau languages) and symbols. The age of this scripture is yet to be determined. However, if it is based on Maharaja Onnong's living years (1894-1962), the type of paper used shows that the scripture is around 70-80 years old. Although the scripture's age does not reach a century, the knowledge it conveys aged hundreds of years.

Also, based on Hj. Bakara's descendant line, the nearest started from Unggun, Sampang Bulan's father who had lived during the Sulu Sultanate era (around 1750-1881); then the scripture was passed down to Sampang Bulan who died before Sabah was governed by BNCC (1881). Later, the scripture was translated by Maharaja Onnong who died in 1962 and now it is passed down to Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong (1938 until now). Based on this "passing-down-action", it can be said that the scripture is more than 300 years old.



Picture 1

Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong is reading *Sampang Bulan's Scripture*

Physically, this scripture, owned by Maharaja Onnong who inherited it from Sampang Bulan, had used ink on brown old paper introduced by BNCC and the paper was no longer produced today. When Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong showed the scripture to the researcher, the scripture's condition is bad – torn, eaten by termites and blurry writings on some pages. Yet, the scripture has detailed the sailing guide based on ten pages of *Islamic* and *Bajau falaq* knowledges; and of ten only four pages are written, while the rest is blank or too blurry to be read.

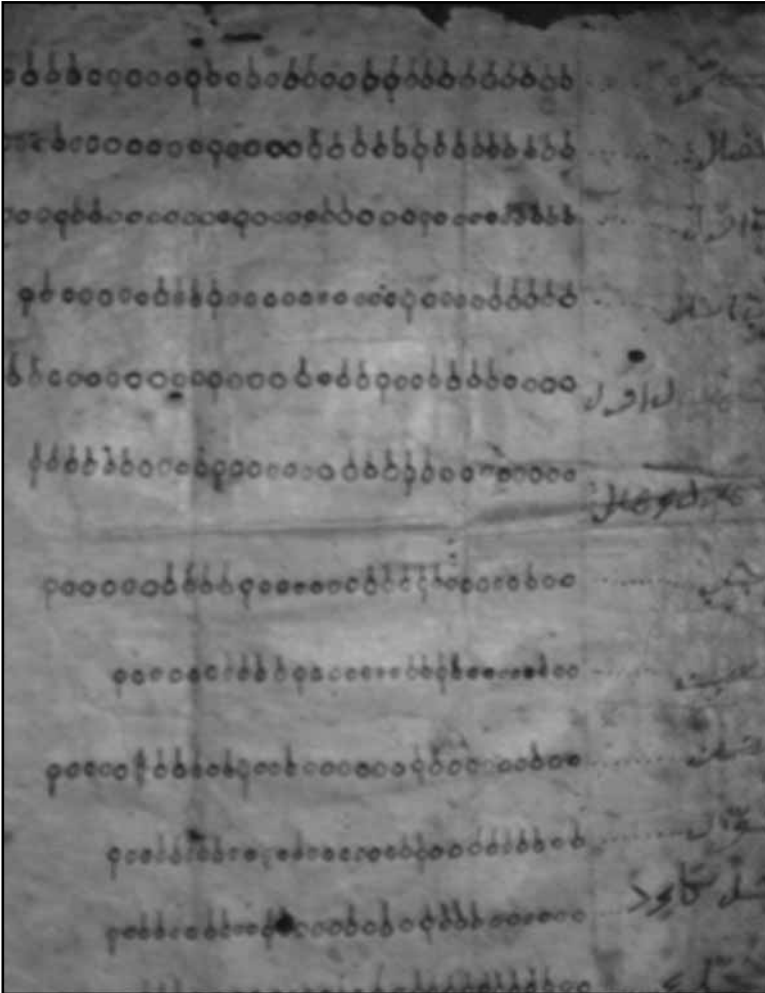
The contents describe the suitable and unsuitable dates to sail based on Islamic calendar and Islamic *falaq* knowledge and people's *falaq* such as moon, stars, earth, wind, waves, sun, animals, things, dreams and others, which are translated in Arabic language and symbols that are also explained in the next writings.

THE SCRIPTURE'S DESCRIPTIONS

Since the sailing scripture is in obsolete condition due to its old age and it is written in mixed languages (Bajau, Malay, and Arabic languages) and also translated in specific symbols, it is difficult for the researcher to interpret and translate the content and meaning fully. The interpretation of the scripture was done by Tuan Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong, as the scripture's successor and well-known individual in the Bajau community, and a few academicians who are fluent in Arabic language as well as the Bajau history in Sabah.

First, Page One. This page explains the suitable and unsuitable dates for sailing based on Islamic *falaq*, i.e. using the Islamic months starting from *Muharram, Safar, Rabiulawal, Rabiulakhir, Jamadilawal, Jamadilakhir, Rejab, Syaaban, Ramadhan, Syawal, Zulkaedah, and Zulhaji (Zulhijjah)* on the right side of the page. The left-side of the page explains the conditions of various weather, namely good weather, windy weather, rainy, strong wind weather. In the scripture, good weather is symbolized by symbol "O", windy weather by symbol "Q", rainy weather by upturned symbol, and raining and strong wind weather is symbolized in 30 days in every month.

Based on the writings and symbols in this page, it is clearly shown that Bajau sailors understand *falaq* based on their experiences and observations on the weather on Sabah and they applied it in their sea activities. It can be said that the sailors had observed the weather's phenomenon like hot weather, windy and cloudy weather, rainy and foggy weather, strong wind and others that were repeatedly occurred according to days in every month. Initially, their knowledge on weather was merely based on memorization and the knowledge was only known to a few elderly and famous individuals of the Bajau community. For the people of Bajau, these knowledgeable and famous people, who had the ability to predict weather accurately, were experts and had magic, and these people were called as *keramat* or holy men when they died.



Picture 2
Ancient Sailing Scripture of *Sampang Bulan* (Page 1)

Second, Pages Two and Three. These pages explained the losses and perfect time for sailing based on Bajau *falaq* (*sains rakyat* or people's sciences) that were based on dreams about animals, things, and specific dreams. On the top of page two, there is a symbol of a boat which tells us that pages two and three are for sailing purposes. These two pages are divided into two, namely: (1) the names for animals, things, and dreams on the right column; and (2) explanations of the items in the right column

Table 1
Description of Symbols According to Islamic Month on Page 1

Month	No Rain [0]	Wind [Q]	Rain [Q Upend]	Rain and Strong Wind [Q Two Ears]
Muharam (محرم)	10	2	17	1
Safar (صفر)	13	1	14	2
Rabiul Awal (ربيع الأول)	24	7	3	0
Rabiul Akhir (ربيع الأخير)	19	9	2	1
Jamadir Awal (جمادى الأولى)	18	2	10	1
Jamadir Akhir (جمادى الآخرة)	17	1	10	2
Rejab (رجب)	18	2	9	1
Syaaban (شعبان)	18	1	8	1
Ramadhan (رمضان)	20	2	6	1
Syawal (شوال)	14	1	13	1
Zulkaedah (ذو القعدة)	16	1	9	2
Zulhijjah (ذو الحجة)	13	3	14	0

are in the left column of the page – explaining what would happen if they continued with the sailing. The pages show that without the sea elements to symbolize the months, it can be said that the thinking of the people during that time was still influenced by nature surrounding them. The right column of pages two to four started with names of horses, harking-deer, tiger, cat, iguana, buffalo, *kibas*, cow, dog, dragon, goat, *mayang* [?], lion, pig, grasshopper, centipede, stick/wood, dreams about ghosts, dreams about meeting people, *timbalun*, bones, meats, bangle, and a legendary eagle. On the left top page of these pages were written with three symbols, i.e. a comma, the “and” word and a fullstop.

According to Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong, the symbols refer to people, danger and sailing activity is prohibited, safe and sailing activity is allowed. By matching the names of the animals, things and dreams with the meaning of the symbols, sailors would decide whether or not they should sail on that day. For example, if a sailor dreamt about meeting a horse, harking-deer, tiger and dog, he was not supposed to sail because the symbols end with the tiger. If a sailor dreamt about meeting a cat, iguana (*pahang*), buffalo, ghosts, *timbalun*, bones, meat, bangle, and a legendary eagle, he can sail but will face obstacles like heavy rain, strong wind, and others. Based on pages two and three, it can be concluded that sailors will gain something and not going to face obstacles during the sailing if they dreamt about meeting people.

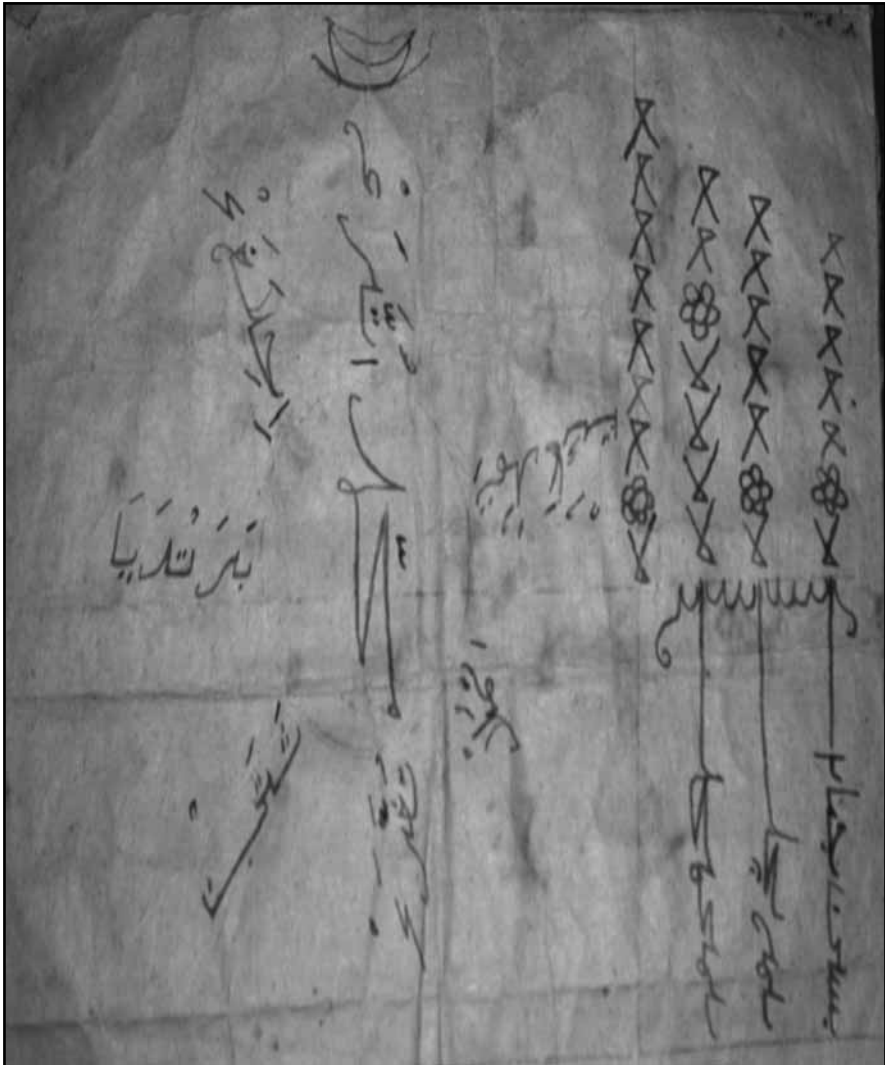


Picture 3
Ancient Sailing Scripture of *Sampang Bulan* (Page2)



Picture 4
Ancient Sailing Scripture of *Sampang Bulan* (Page 3)

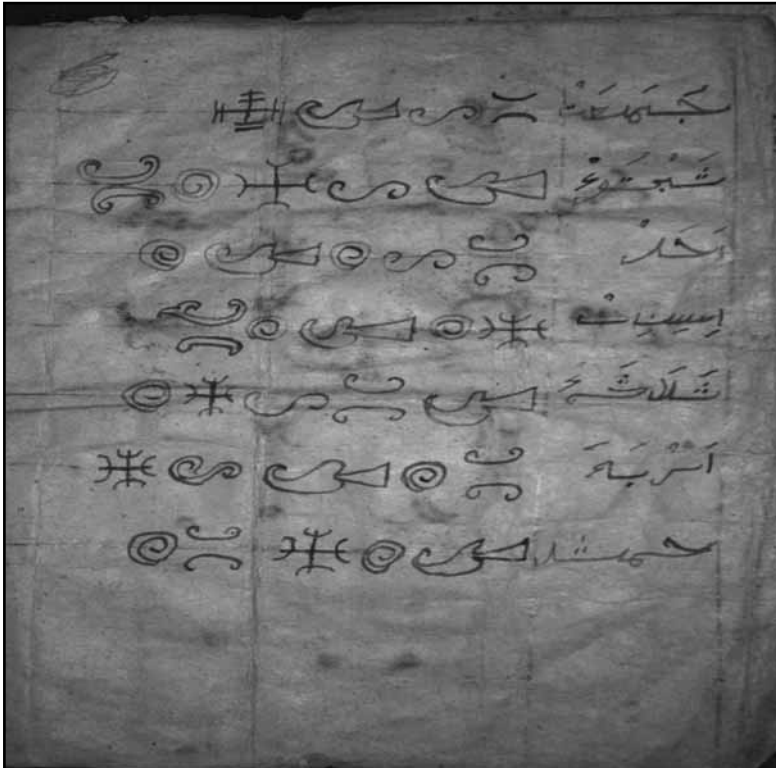
Third, Page Four. Half of this page talks about the wind in Islamic *falaq* that is divided into three elements, i.e. a boat, earth, and Arabic writings. Overall, this page explains the concept of earth using the name of Prophet Muhammad, and the direction of wind according to earth's rotation that starts with the North wind, East wind, South East wind, South wind, West wind, and back to North with again which is called *Hilaga*.



Picture 5
Ancient Sailing Scripture of *Sampang Bulan* (Page 4)

According to the scripture, the North wind or *Hilaga* will occur during the period of West and North wind that will cause strong waves and it is not safe for sailing and fishing activity. According to Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong, sailors can normally sense the wind flow, movement, and the moisture of the air of the night and day, the strong current of the sea surface and many more. According to him, this knowledge has indirectly enabled sailors to plan their sailing journey, especially long distance journey such as from Bum-Bum Island to other islands in southern Philippines. Also, it enables them to plan the accurate and suitable time to go to the sea and fix broken boats during raging waves (North wind).

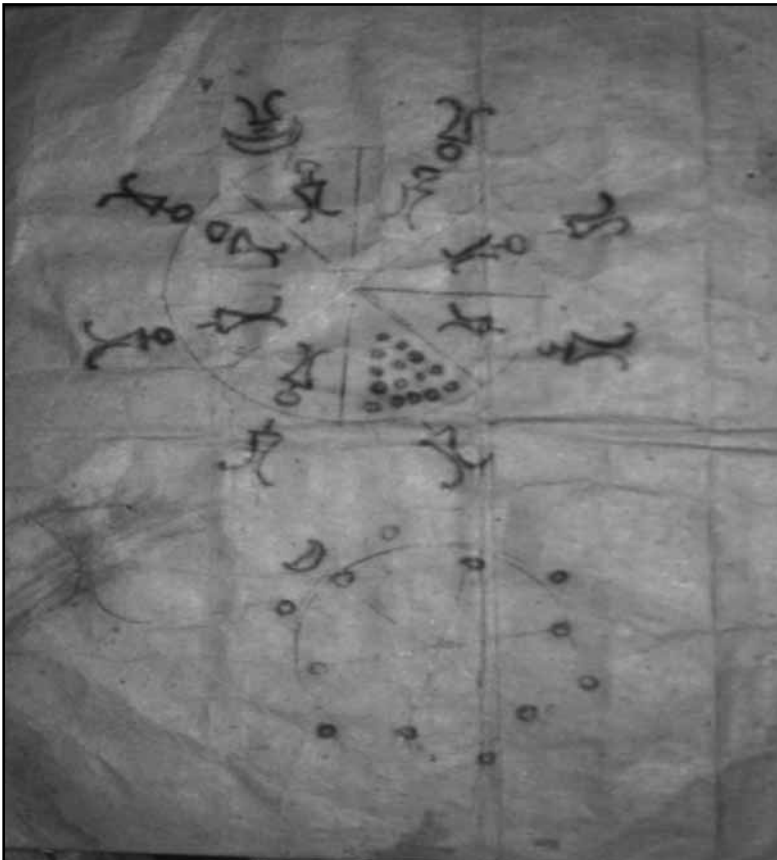
Fourth, Page Five. This page explains the days in Malay-Islam calendar that are suitable or not suitable for a journey or sailing. The page is divided into two parts, i.e. any days in a week that starts with Friday and is followed with Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.



Picture 6
Ancient Sailing Scripture of *Sampang Bulan* (Page 5)

According to this page, Bajau sailors would start their calendar on Friday and end it on Thursday, which shows the supremacy of Friday among other days in the Malay-Islam calendar. The page also tells us that Friday is inappropriate for any activities because it is a day for religious activities. Meanwhile, Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday are perfect for activities because those days will benefit the sailors. Saturday and Wednesday are considered *bad* days as they only bring dangers to sailors.

Fifth, Page Six. This page explains the advantages and disadvantages of a journey or sailing following the cycle of the month that is symbolized in the form of a circle (earth) and it is believed that each month and circle is guarded by an angel. A small and big circle can also be seen in page six.



Picture 7
Ancient Sailing Scripture of *Sampang Bulan* (Page 6)

According to Hj. Bakara Maharaja Onnong, the inner and outer circles “0” represent the 12 months in the Islamic calendar starting with *Muharam* and ending with *Zulhaji* and the small circle surrounding the six circles “0” represents the earth. In addition, there is also a crescent moon on top of one of the months in the circle that represents *Muharam* (January).

The monthly calendar of *Sampang Bulan* tradition is read differently from the Western calendar, i.e. read clockwise that is from the crescent moon symbol and to the left – starting from *Safar* (February) and onwards. The writings and symbols in the small circle of this page shows that the odd month resides in the circle (earth) and the normal months are in the outer circle.

According to Hj. Balara Maharaja Onnong, the months, which are in the outer circle (earth), are *Muharam*, *Rabiul-Awal*, *Jamadir-Awal*, *Ramadhan*, *Zulkaedah*, and these months are good for sailing. Meanwhile, *Safar*, *Rabiul-Akhir*, *Jamadir-Akhir*, *Syaaban*, *Syawal*, and *Zukhaji* are the months that are not appropriate for sailing. The writings and symbols in the big circle show an example of a month out of the twelve months that have a few symbols inside and outside of the circle. There are five symbols in the inner and outer part of the circle, and also, eight columns in the inner part of the circle. However, the existence of these columns is unknown.

CONCLUSION

As explained earlier, the purpose of this study is to find out whether or not the Bajau community, who is known as famous sailors, has knowledge, understanding and has applied the traditional *falaq* (People’s Science) and Islamic *falaq* (Mathematics) in their life as sailors (as claimed by a famous Bajau sailor, *Sampang Bulan* or *Sappit*). The scripture and calendar show that Bajau sailors living in islands and coasts of Sabah, before and during the Sulu Sultanate’s era, have already possessed the significant knowledge and understanding on *falaq* that is outdated according to the Westerners.

It is through their observation and experiences about the elements of nature that have enabled them to produce a scripture for future generation. Since there is no other new findings on sailing, it can be concluded that *Sampang Bulan’s* inheritance is a scripture that emerges Bajau *falaq* and Islamic *falaq*, and the only perfect ancient scripture that has ever been found in the history of traditional maritime of Sabah.

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