

# Atlantis di Pulau Silk: A Visual Narrative of Bajau Laut Cultural Identity

Siti Ayisah Zulkifli<sup>1\*</sup>, Nurul Huda Mohd Din<sup>2</sup>, Mohd Suhaimi Tohid<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This study delves into the captivating exhibition "Atlantis di Pulau Silk" by Dr. Zaimie Sahibil, exploring the intricate relationship between art, culture, and identity. Utilizing Meyer Schapiro's approach to art criticism, which emphasizes the cultural and social contexts of artworks, the research investigates how the exhibition visualizes the narrative of Bajau Laut cultural identity. By examining the cultural context and symbolism, narrative and storytelling techniques, the influence of historical and mythological themes, and the visual representation of cultural identity, this study aims to elucidate the ways in which "Atlantis di Pulau Silk" reflects and shapes the unique identity of the Bajau Laut community. Additionally, the research considers Schapiro's perspective on art as a form of social and political commentary, interpreting the exhibition as a reflection of the challenges faced by the Bajau Laut in preserving their cultural heritage amidst modernization. Through this comprehensive analysis, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between art, culture, and identity, offering fresh insights and perspectives that resonate with contemporary audiences.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Southeast Asia, where the Sulu and Celebes Seas converge, lives the Bajau Laut community, often called the "Sea Gypsies" or "Sea Nomads." For centuries, they have navigated these waters, their lives deeply connected to the ocean. This seafaring culture reflects adaptability, resilience, and a strong bond with nature. Zaimie Sahibil, born on February 5, 1970, in Kudat, Sabah, is a prominent Malaysian artist whose work draws inspiration from his ancestral roots. His art does not merely depict marine life but narrates the spiritual beliefs, traditional practices, and struggles of the Bajau Laut community. Through vibrant colors and dynamic techniques, Zaimie transforms cultural heritage into visual stories that preserve identity and history.

The Bajau Laut community, celebrated for its profound cultural heritage, is currently facing the pressures of modernization that threaten to erode its traditions and unique identity (Zaimie, 2022). This situation raises critical concerns about how art can function as a medium to document, preserve, and communicate cultural values in the context of a

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<sup>1\*</sup> Corresponding author. E-mail address : [sitiayishazulkifli@gmail.com](mailto:sitiayishazulkifli@gmail.com)

rapidly changing world (Malaysiakini, 2023). In response to these challenges, this study focuses on Zaimie Sahibil's exhibition *Atlantis di Pulau Silk* as a case study to understand the relationship between contemporary art and cultural preservation (Zaimie, 2022). The research aims to analyze how the exhibition reflects the cultural identity of the Bajau Laut, focusing on how symbolism, narrative, and visual representation are employed to convey elements of heritage. Furthermore, the study explores the broader role of art as a powerful tool for cultural preservation and social commentary, highlighting its potential to bridge the gap between traditional values and modern realities, aligned with Schapiro's (1994) perspective on the social function of art.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Bajau Laut Community: A Historical and Cultural Overview

A unique and resilient community has thrived for centuries in the vast expanse of Southeast Asia's coastal waters: the Bajau Laut, often romanticized as "Sea Gypsies" or "Sea Nomads" (Sather, 1997). This indigenous group's maritime lifestyle, centered on free-diving, seafaring, and subsistence fishing, has been widely documented as a primary mode of cultural survival (Sather, 1997; Clifton & Majors, 2012). Their deep reliance on the sea for both livelihood and cultural identity resonates strongly with contemporary art narratives, including Zaimie Sahibil's *Atlantis di Pulau Silk* series, which engages with the ecological and cultural dimensions of oceanic life (Zaimie, 2022). This essay examines the Bajau Laut heritage in relation to Sahibil's visual motifs, linking anthropological realities with aesthetic interpretations through the lens of Schapiro's (1953) formal and social analysis.

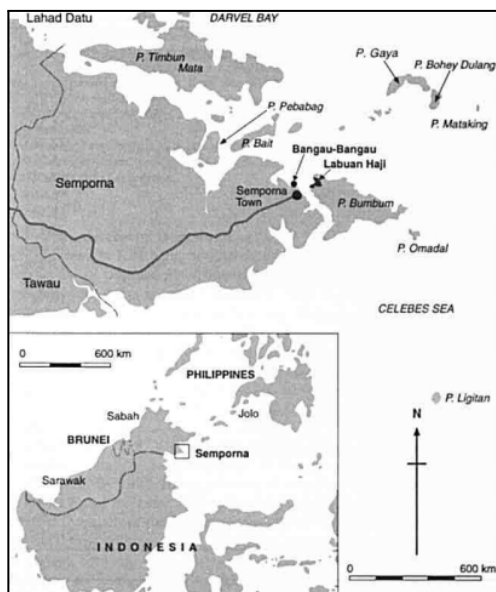


Fig. 1. Semporna District, Showing Location Bajau Laut

Source: Clifford Sather, 1997

The Bajau Laut's story begins on the water, where they have lived for generations. Their traditional homes are boats known as *lepa*, which serve as both shelter and a primary means of transportation (Sather, 1997). These seafaring nomads spend most of their lives on the ocean, navigating the maritime borders of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines with an intimate, indigenous knowledge of the sea (Clifton & Majors, 2012). Their extraordinary diving abilities, often referred to as those of "sea gypsy divers," allow them to harvest marine resources from the ocean floor, a specialized practice passed down through generations (Sather, 1997).

The Bajau Laut's connection to the sea is not merely for subsistence but fundamentally defines their cultural identity (Sather, 1997). Their spiritual beliefs are deeply intertwined with the ocean, with rituals and ceremonies centered around marine elements, consistent with studies emphasizing the sacredness of seascapes among maritime communities (Clifton & Majors, 2012; Horlings, 2016). The Bajau Laut hold the ocean in high reverence, considering it a sacred space that provides for their needs and protects them from harm. This profound connection is visually manifested in their fishing practices, *lepa* decorations featuring oceanic motifs and vibrant blues, and social interactions performed on floating platforms (Sather, 1997; Clifton & Majors, 2012).

## 2.2 The Enigmatic Island of Lagaton: A Journey Through Time and Culture

Nestled in the azure waters of Sabah, Malaysia, Lagaton Island—known in formal mapping systems as Pulau Silk—embodies a layered history of cultural identity and adaptation (Zaimie, 2022). The term “Lagaton” originates from the Ubian phrase *Lahat Pelekatan*, which translates to “a village separated from the mainland” (Sather, 1997; Zaimie, 2022). This linguistic evolution illustrates how language functions as a cultural archive, effectively preserving connections to the Ubian heritage of the Bajau Laut community (Clifton & Majors, 2012). Through this naming convention, the island's identity is inextricably linked to the maritime history of its inhabitants

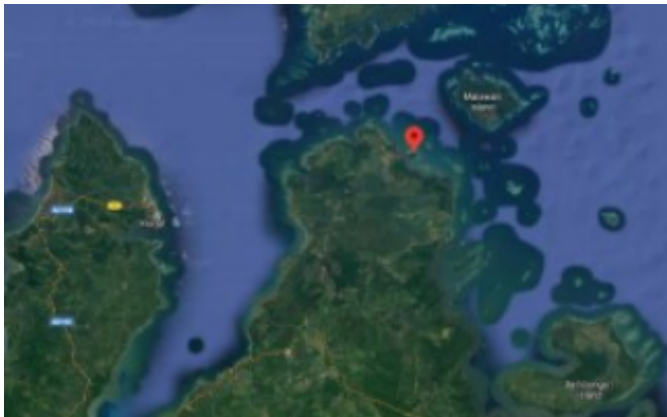


Fig. 2. Location of Pulau Silk  
Source: Zaimie Sahibil, 2022

The island's historical roots trace back to 1888 during British colonial expansion in Borneo, a period marked by maritime trade and political restructuring (Crain, 1997). Archival accounts and oral histories suggest that the Ubian Bajau Laut migrated from Ubian Island in the southern Philippines and settled on Lagaton around 1920, establishing a barter-based economy that reinforced inter-island social networks (Crain, 1997; Zaimie, 2022). This exchange system aligns with anthropological theories on reciprocal trade as a cultural survival mechanism among maritime societies (Clifton & Majors, 2012).

Lagaton's ecological identity is intertwined with its flora, particularly the wild mangkas trees, which provided temporary habitats for silkworms during cyclical migrations, the latest occurring in December 2019 (Zaimie, 2022). This recurring event underpins the island's alternative name, Pulau Silk, and demonstrates how natural cycles inform cultural naming practices (Clifton & Majors, 2012). The motifs observed in community textiles, such as spiral patterns symbolizing silkworm cocoons, further affirm the integration of ecology into Bajau Laut material culture (Zaimie, 2022).

Oral testimonies, such as that of the late Mrs. Sandara Mohamad (1912–2013), highlights subsistence strategies combining fishing with cassava and banana cultivation (Fig. 6). This hybridity reflects adaptive resilience during periods of external stress, notably the Japanese occupation (Crain, 1997). Population growth to 60 families by the mid-20th

century contrasts sharply with the depopulation triggered by piracy in the 1970s, an era marked visually by abandoned stilt houses reclaimed by tidal vegetation (Crain, 1997; Zaimie, 2022).

Resettlement efforts beginning in 2007, spearheaded by families like those of Mr. Abdul Muhin Bin Sahibil, culminated in the restoration of 24 households by 2014 (Zaimie, 2022).. Today, Lagaton Island stands as a case study in cultural persistence, exemplifying themes of displacement, ecological symbiosis, and heritage continuity—interpretations reinforced by recent ethnographic research on maritime resilience in Southeast Asia (Clifton & Majors, 2012).

### **2.3 Kampung Pulau Lagaton, Pulau Silk, Pitas: A Hidden Gem in the North of Borneo**

Kampung Pulau Lagaton, also known as Pulau Silk, is situated in the northern region of Borneo, approximately 195 kilometers from Kota Kinabalu. The island spans about 3,000 square meters, characterized by undulating hills and flat coastal plains that merge into white sandy beaches—a feature that visually symbolizes purity and resilience in Bajau Ubian material culture (Clifton & Majors, 2012; Zaimie, 2022). These beaches are depicted in Fig. 2, where the dominant blue hues of the sea underscore the community's deep maritime identity, often mirrored in their lepa boat decorations and ceremonial textiles (Sather, 1997).

Behind the coastline, dense mangrove forests contribute to the island's ecological stability, serving as natural barriers against erosion and supporting local fishing practices. Ethnographic studies confirm that Bajau communities conceptualize mangroves not merely as resources but as sacred landscapes, reinforcing themes of ecological interdependence in maritime cultures (Clifton & Majors, 2012). This spiritual connection to the environment is a core element of their intangible heritage.

In 2020, Pulau Lagaton was inhabited by approximately 111 residents, primarily from the Bajau Ubian tribe, whose livelihoods are sustained through artisanal fishing (Zaimie, 2022). The recurring motif of fish and oceanic patterns in household ornaments and ritual fabrics symbolizes both sustenance and spiritual continuity (Sather, 1997). This practice reflects broader anthropological discussions on cultural resilience, where aesthetics become visual codifications of survival strategies.

The island's intact social fabric and cultural heritage, represented in community gatherings and traditional attire, position Pulau Lagaton as an emblematic node within Sabah's maritime cultural network. This alignment with scholarship on intangible heritage preservation in Southeast Asian seascapes underscores the importance of documenting these unique maritime identities (Clifton & Majors, 2012).

### **2.4 Cultural Practices and Traditions**

The Bajau Laut's cultural practices exemplify adaptive ingenuity in maritime environments, rooted in traditional knowledge of navigation, tidal patterns, and sustainable fishing methods (Clifton & Majors, 2012). This expertise is visually documented in Fig. 1, where artisanal fish traps and hand-crafted leper boats illustrate ecological harmony rather than exploitative harvesting (Sather, 1997; Zaimie, 2022). Such practices align with anthropological perspectives on indigenous ecological stewardship, where natural resource management is inseparable from cultural identity.

One of the most distinctive elements of Bajau Laut culture is their approach to housing. Historically, they lived aboard elongated leper boats—an architecture of mobility that allowed them to traverse seascapes freely (Sather, 1997). Over time, many transitioned to stilt houses (*rumah panggung*) constructed over shallow waters, integrating blue-painted wooden planks and marine motifs to symbolically maintain their bond with the sea (Sather, 1997; Zaimie, 2022).. The elevated design serves as a pragmatic response to tidal fluctuations, while also functioning as a profound architectural expression of identity.

Their economic organization remains anchored in barter trade, exchanging marine commodities such as fish, shells, and pearls for rice and manufactured goods. This system underscores reciprocal relationships and social cohesion, themes frequently highlighted in maritime anthropology literature (Clifton & Majors, 2012). Visual documentation of trade scenes often shows bundled seashells and coral ornaments, echoing motifs later incorporated into Bajau ritual textiles and contemporary artworks (Zaimie, 2022).

## 2.5 Challenges and Modernization

Despite their rich cultural heritage, the Bajau Laut face escalating challenges linked to environmental degradation and socio-economic transformation (Clifton & Majors, 2012). The depletion of marine resources, evident in shrinking coral reefs and declining fish catches, has undermined their traditional livelihood strategies (Clifton & Majors, 2012; WWF, 2022). Contributing factors such as overfishing, marine pollution, and coastal development are not only ecological crises but also cultural threats, weakening the foundation of maritime knowledge systems (Clifton & Majors, 2012; Zaimie, 2022).

Pressures of modernization and urbanization have led many Bajau Laut families to relocate to terrestrial settlements—a spatial shift that visually signifies the erosion of ocean-based cultural practices (Miller, 2022). This transition often results in the abandonment of boat-making craftsmanship and marine motifs, historically integral to Bajau identity (Sather, 1997).

Efforts to preserve Bajau Laut heritage are illustrated through marine conservation projects, sustainable fishing initiatives, and cultural education programs. These programs often incorporate visual symbolism, such as waves and oceanic colors, in campaign materials to reinforce identity while promoting ecological awareness (Zaimie, 2022).. Literature emphasizes the critical role of community-led governance and intergenerational education in balancing tradition with adaptation (Clifton & Majors, 2012).

The Bajau Laut community remains a living testament to human–sea interdependence, embodying resilience through material culture, oral traditions, and adaptive strategies (Sather, 1997). Their enduring use of blue-hued textiles and spiral shell motifs in ceremonial objects visually encodes continuity despite socio-economic disruptions (Sather, 1997; Zaimie, 2022). As they navigate the liminal space between tradition and modernity, their story resonates as a cautionary yet hopeful narrative in global discourses on cultural sustainability and marine conservation.

## 2.6 Zaimie Sahibil's Contributions to Marine-Inspired Art

Zaimie Sahibil, a contemporary painter from Kudat, Sabah, has made significant contributions to marine-inspired art that reflects the cultural heritage of the Bajau Laut—an indigenous seafaring community in Southeast Asia (Zaimie, 2022). His works vividly portray maritime life through recurring motifs such as *lepa* (traditional Bajau Laut boats) and marine ecosystems, rendered in vibrant blue and turquoise hues (Zaimie, 2022).. According to Zaimie, “the *lepa* represents not just a mode of transportation but the spiritual essence of Bajau Laut identity” (Z. Sahibil, personal communication, July 12, 2024). This insight aligns with Sather’s (1997) ethnographic analysis, which emphasizes the centrality of the *lepa* in Bajau Laut cosmology.

Sahibil’s paintings also serve as a visual narrative of environmental advocacy (Zaimie, 2023). He integrates imagery of bleaching coral reefs and turbulent seascapes to convey the threats of climate change and overfishing to marine ecosystems (WWF, 2022). By employing such visual storytelling, Sahibil not only documents the Bajau Laut’s maritime traditions but also raises awareness about ecological issues affecting their survival (Zaimie, 2022).., 2023). As he stated

during the interview, “Art can be a voice for the sea and for the people who live by it” (Z. Sahibil, personal communication, July 12, 2024).

Beyond the canvas, Sahibil engages in community-based conservation programs aimed at preserving both cultural heritage and marine biodiversity (Zaimie, 2022). His participation in local workshops and collaborations with NGOs reflects a commitment to sustaining the Bajau Laut’s identity in the face of modernization and environmental degradation. Exhibitions of his works, both in Malaysia and internationally, have amplified these narratives, positioning his art as a bridge between tradition and contemporary environmental discourse (Zaimie, 2022).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in the art criticism framework developed by Meyer Schapiro. The analysis focuses on two significant artworks from Zaimie Sahibil’s solo exhibition *Atlantis di Pulau Silk*, selected for their strong thematic representation of Bajau Laut cultural identity and their distinctive use of narrative and symbolism.

#### 3.1 Data Collection and Artwork Selection

The primary data were obtained through direct engagement with the artist, Zaimie Sahibil, via an in-depth interview conducted on Google Meet. This interview provided insights into the artist’s conceptual motivations, creative processes, and intended meanings behind the artworks. Additional data were sourced from exhibition documentation, catalogues, and relevant literature on Bajau Laut culture and Southeast Asian contemporary art. Two artworks selected are *Atlantis di Pulau Silk* series 1 and series 19.

#### 3.2 Analytical Framework

The artworks were examined using Schapiro’s art criticism methodology, which integrates formal, iconographic, and socio-historical analysis:

Table 1. Analytic Framework using Meyer Schapiro

| No | Subject                    | Description                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Formal Analysis            | Detailed examination of compositional elements such as line, shape, color, texture, and spatial arrangement to determine their role in conveying meaning and emotion.                                 |
| 2  | Iconography                | Identification and interpretation of symbols and motifs to uncover cultural and spiritual references embedded in the artworks.                                                                        |
| 3  | Socio-Historical Context   | Consideration of historical and social conditions influencing the creation of the artworks, particularly the tension between modernization and cultural preservation within the Bajau Laut community. |
| 4  | Interdisciplinary Approach | Application of concepts from anthropology and cultural studies to contextualize the artworks within broader discourses on identity and heritage.                                                      |

To ensure the credibility and rigor of the analysis, the following steps were undertaken:

**Table 2. Reliability Measure**

| No | Subject                          | Description                                                                                                                                          |
|----|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Direct Artist Testimony          | An exclusive interview with Zaimie Sahibil provided primary insights into artistic intentions and cultural references.                               |
| 2  | Triangulation of Sources         | Visual analysis was corroborated with the artist's statements, exhibition materials, and scholarly literature.                                       |
| 3  | Systematic Framework Application | Each artwork was analyzed using the same structured process across all components of Schapiro's method.                                              |
| 4  | Peer Review                      | Preliminary findings were reviewed by scholars in Southeast Asian art and cultural studies to validate interpretations and minimize researcher bias. |

#### 4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This research explores the application of Meyer Schapiro's approach to art criticism in analyzing Dr. Zaimie Sahibil's exhibition "Atlantis di Pulau Silk," with a focus on visualizing the narrative of Bajau Laut cultural identity. Schapiro's methodology, which emphasizes understanding the cultural and social context of artworks, provides a robust framework for interpreting the exhibition's themes. By examining the cultural context and symbolism, narrative and storytelling techniques, the influence of historical and mythological themes, and the visual representation of cultural identity, this study aims to elucidate how "Atlantis di Pulau Silk" reflects and shapes the cultural identity of the Bajau Laut community. Additionally, the research considers Schapiro's perspective on art as a form of social and political commentary, interpreting the exhibition as a reflection of the challenges faced by the Bajau Laut in preserving their cultural heritage amidst modernization. Through this analysis, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between art, culture, and identity in the context of the Bajau Laut.



Fig. 3. Atlantis di Pulau Silk series 1, 150cm X 150cm, Acrylic on Canvas  
Sources: Zaimie Sahibil, 2022

##### 4.1 Formal Analysis

Series 1 presents a dynamic underwater composition characterized by curvilinear forms and rhythmic shapes. The dominant use of blues, purples, and greens establishes an ethereal, oceanic atmosphere that suggests depth and movement (Zaimie Sahibil, personal communication, July 12, 2024). The circular distribution of color creates unity and visual harmony, while variations in shape and texture generate a sense of fluidity. These features align with Schapiro's emphasis

on formal analysis, where elements such as line and color contribute not only to aesthetic quality but also to symbolic meaning.

Light and shadow are used strategically to create tonal contrasts, reinforcing the illusion of depth and evoking an emotional response of wonder and mystery. The layered application of pigment adds tactile richness, which, according to the artist, symbolizes the complexity and interconnectedness of marine life (Zaimie Sahibil, personal communication, July 12, 2024). The color palette dominated by vivid blues, purples, and greens evokes the depth and luminosity of the underwater environment, immersing the viewer in an ethereal marine world. The artist explained that these hues were deliberately chosen to capture the spiritual and ecological vitality of the ocean.

#### **4.2 Iconography**

The title *Atlantis di Pulau Silk* serves as a primary iconographic cue. The reference to Atlantis, a mythical lost city, functions as a metaphor for fragility and loss, drawing parallels between the mythological narrative and the potential disappearance of marine ecosystems. By combining Atlantis with “Pulau Silk” (Malay for Silk Island), Sahibil localizes the myth within a Southeast Asian maritime context, connecting universal themes of loss and discovery to regional cultural heritage.

According to the artist, the silk-like textures and layered transparency were intentionally employed to symbolize the delicate interconnectedness of marine life, visually linking cultural symbolism with environmental concerns. This interplay between visual metaphor and ecological meaning exemplifies Schapiro’s principle that iconography must be examined in relation to its social and cultural framework.

#### **4.3 Socio-Historical Context**

The work draws from the heritage of the Bajau Laut, a maritime community whose identity is deeply tied to the sea (Miller, 2022). However, modernization, resource depletion, and state-imposed restrictions threaten both their environment and cultural practices (Clifton & Majors, 2012). By situating the Atlantis metaphor within the context of Bajau Laut traditions, Sahibil transforms the artwork into a profound cultural commentary on loss and survival (Zaimie, 2022). The vibrant, harmonious composition suggests both an aesthetic celebration of maritime life and an implicit warning about the fragility of marine ecosystems (WWF, 2022). This interpretation aligns with Schapiro’s (1999) Marxist-influenced view that artworks are social product expressions shaped by specific historical and material conditions.

#### **4.4 Interdisciplinary Approach**

Through Schapiro’s framework, Series 1 emerges as a layered narrative that combines formal beauty, mythical symbolism, and contextual critique. Its compositional rhythm and chromatic harmony not only depict an underwater world but also encode messages about heritage preservation and ecological responsibility.



Fig. 4. Atlantis di Pulau Silk series 19, 165cm X 214cm, Acrylic on Canvas  
Source: Zaimie Sahibil, 2023

#### 4.5 Formal Analysis

Zaimie Sahibil's Atlantis Pulau Silk is a profound artwork that intertwines mythological, cultural, and environmental narratives. The artwork references Atlantis, a mythical civilization described by Plato, which is often associated with a lost utopia, advanced technology, and an underwater city. This myth parallels contemporary concerns about environmental degradation and the potential loss of natural wonders like coral reefs.

Series 19 demonstrates a denser visual texture compared to Series 1, with overlapping organic forms that create a labyrinthine effect reminiscent of underwater ruins. The palette shifts toward deep cobalt blues, iridescent greens, and stark gold accents, producing an effect of both opulence and depth. The compositional rhythm suggests turbulence, a stark contrast to the serene flow of Series 1.

Zaimie remarks:

*“Dalam siri ini, saya mahu gambarkan kekacauan bukan hanya kecantikan. Laut kita sedang sakit. Jadi, susunan bentuk dan warna lebih padat, seolah-olah terperangkap”*

(Zaimie Sahibil, personal communication, July 12, 2024).

#### 4.6 Iconography

The visual elements of Series 19 extend the metaphor of Atlantis as a lost paradise, but here the forms resemble fragmented coral ruins, skeletal fish structures, and ornamental motifs that evoke decay rather than vitality. Gold embellishments suggest luxury corrupted by human greed, aligning with the ecological critique embedded in the artwork. The artwork is situated within a Southeast Asian framework, where islands and the sea play a central role in history, culture, and livelihoods. The vibrant coral reefs depicted in the series conjure vivid imagery of the mythical lost city of Atlantis, serving as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for prudence and wisdom in preserving this extraordinary natural environment.

The depletion of marine life is often a result of human actions, such as fish bombs and sodium cyanide poisoning of marine ecosystems. The artwork serves as a historical commentary on the transition from untouched ecosystems to the challenges of modern conservation. The layered textures and colors in the artwork evoke the shimmering beauty of silk, symbolizing the richness and delicate interconnectedness of marine life. This visual metaphor underscores the need for environmental conservation and the protection of underwater worlds that are as beautiful as they are endangered.

#### 4.7 Socio-Historical Context

Atlantis Pulau Silk Series 1 is a visually rich and profound artwork that highlights the beauty and importance of the marine ecosystem of Pulau Silk. The artwork uses the Atlantis myth as a metaphor to underscore the potential loss of this natural wonder if not properly conserved, making it both aesthetically pleasing and socially relevant. The title Atlantis Pulau Silk references Atlantis, a mythical underwater city, suggesting themes of mystery, lost civilizations, and the intersection of myth and nature.

The artwork features elements that symbolize the rich marine life and biodiversity of Pulau Silk, including depictions of various marine species, coral reefs, and underwater landscapes. The use of acrylic on canvas allows for vibrant colors and dynamic textures, evoking a sense of awe and wonder at the beauty of the marine world. The artwork also conveys a sense of urgency and concern about the environmental challenges faced by the region.

#### 4.8 Interdisciplinary Approach

The layered textures and colors evoke the shimmering beauty of silk, symbolizing the richness and delicate interconnectedness of marine life. The series aims to raise awareness about the importance of preserving marine ecosystems and the cultural heritage of local communities. The mystical quality of the composition aligns with the idea of Atlantis as a dreamlike and unattainable place, blending reality with fantasy.

By incorporating local cultural references (e.g., "Pulau") and a focus on the ocean, the artist roots the work in a specific geographic and cultural context, celebrating Southeast Asia's relationship with the sea. The abstract representation of the ocean and marine life reflects the artist's personal experiences or emotional connection to the water, portraying it not as a literal depiction but as an imaginative, symbolic world. This personal and cultural connection enriches the artwork, making it a homage to the beauty, mystery, and fragility of marine ecosystems.

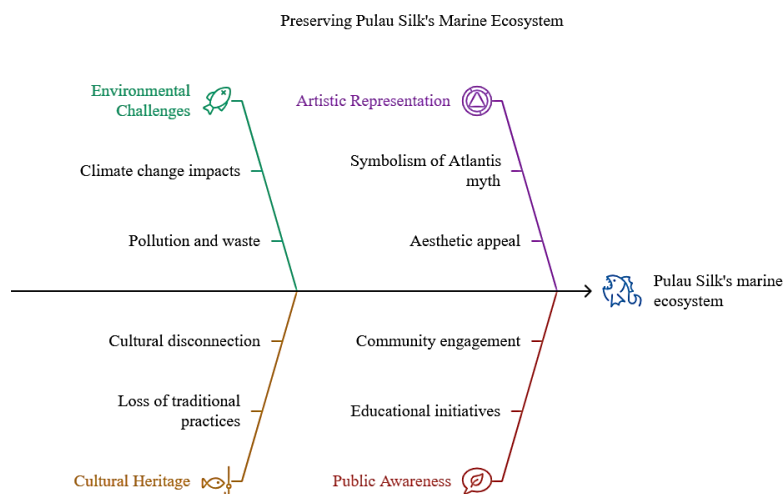


Fig. 5. Preserving the Atlantis Pulau Silk Series  
Source: Author's personal collection, 2023

The artwork resonates with traditions of abstract and symbolic representation while drawing on the Southeast Asian artistic tendency to integrate nature and spirituality. The rhythmic flow and vibrant palette allude to spiritual or meditative experiences, inviting viewers to reflect on their connection to nature and the cosmos. The underwater setting symbolizes a journey into a deeper understanding of the self, the environment, or humanity's place within the natural world. The

artwork exists in a time of heightened global awareness about environmental crises and cultural identity. By incorporating modern elements, the artwork remains relevant and resonant in the contemporary context.

Zaimie Sahibil's *Atlantis Pulau Silk* serves as a powerful medium that raises awareness about the marine ecosystem and biodiversity of Pulau Silk. Through its vibrant depiction of marine life and cultural heritage, the artwork educates viewers about the importance of preserving these natural and cultural treasures. This aligns with broader goals of utilizing marine cultural heritage (MCH) for the preservation of coastal systems, as highlighted in various studies and initiatives. By celebrating the beauty and diversity of marine life, the artwork also highlights the fragility of underwater ecosystems, potentially inspiring viewers to consider the impact of human activities such as pollution, climate change, and overfishing on these delicate environments.

The artwork metaphorically references the mythical lost city of Atlantis, symbolizing the potential loss of the pristine marine environment and cultural heritage of Pulau Silk if not properly conserved. This serves as a call to action for environmental preservation, emphasizing the need for sustainable practices to protect the marine ecosystem from threats such as climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction. By invoking the myth of Atlantis and its association with loss, the artwork serves as a symbolic reminder of what humanity stands to lose if efforts are not made to protect and preserve the natural world.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Zaimie Sahibil's solo exhibition, "*Atlantis di Pulau Silk*," is a mesmerizing journey into the heart of the Bajau Laut community's cultural identity and heritage in Sabah. Through a rich tapestry of artistic techniques and mediums, Sahibil masterfully captures the essence of a people intricately connected to the sea and their ancestral traditions. This exhibition is not merely a display of art; it is a vibrant celebration of the Bajau Laut's enduring legacy, preserving their stories and way of life for future generations. The artworks in "*Atlantis di Pulau Silk*" beautifully illustrate the fusion of tradition and modernity, showcasing how contemporary art can be a powerful vehicle for cultural expression. Sahibil's innovative use of materials like fabric and beads, alongside his skillful painting and collage work, creates a vivid and dynamic portrayal of the Bajau Laut's unique cultural identity. Each piece is a testament to the community's resilience and rich cultural heritage.

Moreover, the exhibition highlights the pivotal role of art as a medium for cultural dialogue and education. By weaving the Bajau Laut culture into a compelling visual narrative, Sahibil invites viewers to immerse themselves in and appreciate the rich cultural diversity of Sabah. His work acts as a bridge between the past and present, ensuring that the traditions and stories of the Bajau Laut community continue to inspire and resonate with future generations. In essence, "*Atlantis di Pulau Silk*" is a profound testament to Zaimie Sahibil's dedication to preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Sabah. This exhibition not only celebrates the unique identity of the Bajau Laut community but also underscores the broader significance of art in fostering cultural understanding and appreciation. Through his work, Sahibil beckons us to explore, appreciate, and preserve the rich cultural tapestry of Sabah, inviting us all to be part of this ongoing narrative.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

**Siti Ayisah Zulkifli:** Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing-original draft; **Nurul Huda Mohd Din,;** Conceptualisation, supervision, writing- review and editing, and validation. **Mohd Suhaimi Tohid:** Conceptualisation, supervision, writing- review and editing, and validation.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

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