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Role of Tok Biah in The Customs and Beliefs of Orang Asli Jakun, Bekok, Segamat, Johor

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Abstract

Purpose of this study: To describe and analyze the role of *Tok Biah* in the customs and beliefs of *Orang Asli*.

Methodology: A series of interviews and observations were carried out for this exploratory study to obtain data on the unique status of *Tok Biah*.

Main Findings: *Tok Biah* is considered an honorable individual within the *Orang Asli Jakun's* system of health as she plays an important role in ensuring the wellbeing and general health of the community and acts as an intermediary between believers and the divinity symbol (God). *Tok Biah's* role is also crucially needed in the *Majlis Adat Berdoa Urang Huluk* and the *Upacara Mandi Tepung Tawar* at Keramat Datuk Simpang Keanan, Kampung Tamok, as a distinguished religious symbol among *Orang Asli Jakun* in Bekok, Johor.

Application: This study highlights *Orang Asli's* acceptance of *Tok Biah* as an influential person for important matters in the community. She plays a vital role in officiating significant rituals carried out by her people. In addition, she is also a symbol of the *Orang Asli's* beliefs in their God. *Tok Biah* also takes care of the health and well-being of her community even though they do visit medical clinics when they fall sick. This role is very significant for *Orang Asli's* emotional and physical well-being.

Novelty/Originality of this Study: To the best of the authors' knowledge, there have not been any previous studies done on this topic and at this location. Thus this study is a novelty because it highlights the significant role of *Tok Biah* in the daily lives of the *Orang Asli*. *Tok Biah* is considered unique because she is a female while most *Tok Bomohs* among the *Orang Asli* communities are males.

Keywords: Orang Asli Jakun Bekok, Role of Tok Biah, Female Shaman, Mantra.

Introduction

As of January 2018, the *Orang Asli*, or indigenous people community in Malaysia consists of approximately 150,000 people. This represents 0.5% of the total population of Malaysia (Kementerian Kemajuan Luar Bandar Dan Wilayah, 2016). The word *Orang Asli* is a Malay translation of the English word 'aborigine', 'orang' meaning 'human' and 'asli' means

'original' or 'traditional'(Lillegraven, 2006; Nobuta, 2007). Although there is no single accepted definition of indigenous people, they can be defined as "indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, or parts of them (Hotez, 2014; li & Nations, n.d.; Kardooni et al., 2014). The *Orang Asli* are classified into three distinct groupings: The *Negrito*, *Senoi* and Proto-Malay (Benjamin, 2004; Khor & Shariff, 2008; Law et al., 2018). Different ethnic, languages, modes of livelihood and social organization patterns differentiate the *Orang Asli*. *Orang Laut*, *Orang Seletar*, and Mah *Meri*, who live close to the coast, are mainly fishermen while some Temuan, Jakun and Semai sub-ethnic groups have taken to permanent agriculture (Abdullah et al., 2015). All *Orang Asli* communities have dwellings in Peninsular Malaysia except for Perlis and Penang. The *Temoq*, *Senoi* and *Negrito* speak related languages known as *Aslian*, which belong to the Mon_Khmer family, while the ancestors of the Proto-Malay spoke languages that, like Malay, belonged to the Austronesian family of languages. The Proto-Malay group is similar in appearance to Malays, and inherited the Malay culture and practices but are of diverse origins. They live along the Straits of Malacca and in southern Johor. They consist of several ethnicities such as *Temuan*, *Semelai*, *Jakun*, *Kanaq*, *Orang Kuala*, *Orang Seletar* dan *Orang Laut* (Masron et al., 2013). In Bekok, Johor, the Jakun tribes settled down in the coastal areas of Selai-Endau-Rompin National Park within six village settlements built by the government. The villages are Kampung *Orang Asli* Tembayan, Kampung *Orang Asli* Kudong, Kampung *Orang Asli* Tamok, Kampung *Orang Asli* Kemedak, Kampung *Orang Asli* Selai and Kampung *Orang Asli* Lenek. Most of the *Orang Asli* that live in these villages are of the *Jakun* tribe.

Indigenous communities worldwide including those in Malaysia have unique indigenous knowledge. The knowledge is very diverse, covering medical treatments and practices, songs, dance, legends, dreams, rituals, folklore, laws, scientific works and stories as well as agricultural technologies and techniques. This information typically distinguishes one community from another. The majority of *Orang Asli* practices the beliefs of animism. Their daily lives are significantly influenced by the natural environment such as mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, boulders, and caves. In fact, they believe that their village will be hit by natural disasters if they disregard any prohibitions that are imposed on them (Kipli, 2016); www.jheoa.gov.my

The close relationship between humans and nature contributes to creating a unique culture and beliefs for the *Orang Asli Jakun*. The precious medicinal values usually belong to indigenous people as they have been using medicinal plants for a myriad of times following their ancestors' practices for generations (Documentation et al., n.d.). Hence, when *Orang Asli* search for health remedies, their efforts are naturally interrelated with the faith that they have and the practices that they carried out and that are embedded into their culture. Shamans or *Tok Bomohs* or *Pawang* in the Malay language have a powerful and significant position in this structure as they are the caretakers of accumulated past legends and folklore histories, traditional practices and cultures, and amongst some of them, a referral for land management skills. They also select and train potential successors to help preserve and protect their heritage for the future generation (Hearn, 2017) At the same time, not all people in a community are potential candidates. Only a few selected ones will be given this opportunity (Sarifin et al., 2017).

Almost all shamans or *Tok Bomohs* are males, a custom practised not only in this country but also in other parts of the world (Dixon, 1908). A significant number of studies on male shamans have been documented throughout the years. Even so, there is a small number of studies on female shamans in Japan (Kuminitsu, 2003), Peru (Andrea Herbert, 2010), Brazil (Thalji & Yakushko, 2018), India (Hatley, 2019); China (Noll, 2004). Besides the traditional roles of a shaman, a female shaman has an additional role to fulfill. She is responsible for taking care of pregnant women during the pregnancy period, assisting in the process of delivery and supervising during the confinement period. They also act as midwives when pregnant women of the village want to give birth to a baby (Mihaela Rus, Mihaela Luminita Sandu, 2020).

In this study, the focus is on *Tok Biah*, who is considered a shaman in Kampung Tamok. Her unique role as a female mediator between her community and their God is extraordinary. This is because she is the only female *Tok Bomoh* in her village as well as in the nearby villages. *Tok Biah* was also the Keeper of Customs, officiator for special rituals such as the worshipping of sacred grounds and the healer of spiritual and physical sickness of the people in need. Thus, this study's objective is to analyze the role of *Tok Biah* in the *Orang Asli Jakun* community. Traditionally the *Orang Asli* lived in and subsisted on the forests, but the increasing loss of forest areas plus the integration of the community into mainstream society and urbanization, are leading to the rapid loss of their traditional knowledge and culture (Lee et al., 2009). Because of the rapid changes happening among the *Orang Asli* today, the traditional knowledge has not been practiced as it used to be, especially among the younger generation and this may lead to erosion of knowledge and eventual loss (Ismail & Mohamed, 2014). Its ethnography is dangerously close to becoming only a small mark in history within a few years. This creates an urgency to create documentation of the lesser-known communities (Lye, 2011). In addition to this, the documentation of traditional knowledge is essential to retain and protect the identity of the ethnic communities.

Literature Review

'*Orang Asli*' is the term that refers exclusively to the non-Malay indigenous people of Peninsular Malaysia (Societies, 2016) that live in Peninsular Malaysia (Akta *Orang Asli* Disemak, 2006). Section 3 of the Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954 defines *Orang Asli* as any person whose male parent is or was, a member of an aboriginal ethnic group, who speaks an aboriginal language and habitually follows an aboriginal way of life and aboriginal customs and beliefs (Mada, 2020). As at 31 March 2018, there are 179,197 *Orang Asli* in Peninsular Malaysia (*Pendudukoasubetnikmac-2018*, n.d.). Pahang state had the most number of *Orang Asli* at 63,174 followed by Perak (51,585), Kelantan (13,123), Selangor (10,399), Johor (10,257) and Negeri Sembilan (9,502) (Abdullah & Ahmad, 2019). The *Orang Asli* of Johor live in the districts of Batu Pahat, Pontian, Kota Tinggi, Mersing, Muar and Segamat. Officially, there are approximately eighteen *Orang Asli* ethnic tribes that can be categorized under three main groups based on their genetics and origin. The first group of the *Orang Asli* tribes is the *Semang/Negrito* tribe (found in the Northern states of Peninsular Malaysia except for Penang and Perlis), the *Senoi* tribe (found in the central states of Peninsular Malaysia) and the Proto Malay/*Melayu Asli* tribe (found in the southern states of Peninsular Malaysia) The languages that they use are Bahasa *Orang Asli* (Austroasiatic Language) and Bahasa Melayu Asli (Austronesia Language). Several beliefs that they follow are such as Animism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism dan Buddha (Palmer, 2015).

Generally speaking, the *Orang Asli* tribes practice a variety of rituals, cultures, customs, beliefs and a healthy way of life that is unique. They lead a harmonious and high-quality lifestyle alongside nature. This is because their economic survival is dependent on natural resources. In addition, most *Orang Asli* depend on the forest for their health and for preserving their culture. Hence, *bomoh/pawang/dukun* or shaman is crucial in managing the community's health as they are the intermediary between the forest and the *Orang Asli's* beliefs. This practice is largely due to the influence of Mother Nature and practices that they inherit from their forefathers (Faezah et.al., 2017; Zain, 2016). Traditional shamans or *Tok Bomoh*, (Zaki & Hussin, 2019); Azlan and Suan, 2018) is a term that is used both in Indonesia and Malaysia and which refers to one or a few people in a community who have the gift, knowledge or power to cure their patients' ailments through interactions using mystical presences. A *Tok Bomoh* not only cures physical ailments but also an illness that is spiritual (Mahali, 2018). This act of traditional healing has been carried out by people in Southeast Asian countries for hundreds of years before the arrival of Islam, Christianity and Buddha (Affiq et al., 2018; Alamry, 2015). Meanwhile, World Health Organization (2013), defines "traditional medicine as a total sum of skills, knowledge, and practices based on theories, beliefs and experiences, indigenous from different cultures whether explicable or not, is used to maintain health as well as in the prevention, rehabilitation, diagnosis or treatment of physical and mental illness". This is what *Tok Biah*, other and previous *Tok Bomohs* have been doing for the benefit of their communities.

In carrying out her many duties, *Tok Biah* made use of mantras as a method of conveying the wishes of her patients to God. The word "mantra" consists of the Sanskrit root man, "to think," and the ending -track, indicating instrumentality; thus a mantra can be understood as "an instrument of thought (or the mind)" or "an instrument for producing (a special kind of) thought." Mantras have often been referred to as "magic formulas" or "spells. This innate effective power of the mantra is believed to derive from its intimate connection with God or ultimate reality. We have already noted that mantras are popularly used to heal disease, ensure conception and safe delivery of children, and achieve desires for success in business and love. Juriah et al (2015) suggest that mantra practices and rituals have existed for a long time. People in that period practiced animism. They believed that the natural world was also the home of the unseen spirits who lived in mountains, hills, valleys, big trees and beside river banks. Thus these places are believed to be occupied by the spirits and are considered spiritual. Human beings are prone to be under the spell of the spirits and that resulted in them falling sick. One of the ways to protect them is through the assistance of the *Tok Bomoh* who will use mantras, chants and spells to cure the patients.

The use of mantras is related to the beliefs and culture of people who have lived in this part of the world for thousands of years (Hassan, 2016; Rusidin & Hamid, 2015). Other findings showed that mantras had seven purposes. Understanding the mantras aids in providing comprehension to the leader, inculcating allegiance to the leader, resolving arguments, to help safeguard leadership responsibilities, as a method and system of peace planning, training members for common respect, and refining mutual fondness for fellow members of the community (Yuni & Amat, 2019). Based on several analyses that have been carried out by researchers, almost all words are used metaphorically in the mantra and are based on nature. Words that are frequently used are names of animals, the moon, the stars and the sun. The application of nature's elements provides a powerful assurance and is one of the conditions

that have to exist in the shaman or someone related to him in determining the effectiveness of the mantra. In their findings, Natsir et al (2020) suggested that the word mantra in Arabic referred to *rukya* which means protection. Therefore, a mantra is carried out to ask for protection against evil. A *Tok Bomoh* usually has a mystical ability in curing the local society of almost all kinds of diseases. He has his explicit mantra for specific diseases and it is believed that the society will be relieved of diseases soon after he read the mantra. The mantra consist of short sentences in the form of traditional poetry. They sometimes used words or phrases taken from nature (flora and fauna).

The objective of mantra reciting or chanting is to generate harmony, tranquillity, and restoration in the body by reducing the stress that can cause ailments. Even though mantra chanting is over 5,000 years old, its health and wellness benefits are still being evaluated. For this study, "mantra chanting" denotes a category of meditation-induced by reciting or repeating a sound, term, or sentence that can be vocalized, sung, or thought within. Mantra chanting is executed in unobtrusive, peaceful surroundings for any stretch of period. Traditional health and wellness that use traditional mantra chanting have rich and deep-rooted connections to culture and rituals, health and wellness, and religion and spirit. These three areas represent the mind, the body, and the spirit interconnections that mantra chanting promotes in health and wellness. Traditional Western, Indian and Chinese medicinal practices also make use of mantras. For example, the traditional Indian medicine is based on a large body of Vedic Sanskrit text, which is the oldest Hindu literature. There are four Vedas: (a) hymns to be recited, (b) texts to be recited, (c) formulas to be sung, and (d) collections of spells, incantations and charms. The individual verses are called mantras. Rare scholarly documents of the Vedic physicians indicate that mantras were used during the rites of delivery and birth, in rejuvenation cures, in therapy for poisonous stings and bites, and for treating mental disorders attributed to demonic possession. In addition, healing ceremonies used mantra chanting to free the sick from demons, to scare or confuse invading entities in the body, and to improve the effectiveness of healing interventions and medicines (Burchett, 2008). In addition, in the Hindu tradition, mantras are verbal formulas whose sounds, when properly vocalized, are believed to possess an innate power—the power of the deity with which they are identified—to affect reality.

Research Methodology

Geographical Area

In Segamat, this study is carried out in the district of Bekok which is part of the Selai-Endau-Rompin National Park. There are six *Orang Asli* villages here and they are Kampung *Orang Asli* Tembayan, Kampung *Orang Asli* Kudong, Kampung *Orang Asli* Tamok, Kampung *Orang Asli* Kemedak, Kampung *Orang Asli* Selai dan Kampung *Orang Asli* Lenek. The majority of the people living in these villages are from the *Orang Asli Jakun* tribe. The interviews and observations were done in Kampung Tamok. Even though *Tok Biah* lives in Kampung Tamok, she serves the people from nearby villages and outsiders too.

Qualitative Study

Ahlstedt et al (2019) stated that a qualitative study has an explorative design with an ethnographic approach and used participant observation, informal interviews during observation and individual interviews. Participant observation has been seen to connect the researcher to basic human experiences. This method provides insights into the unspoken

elements embodied in gestures and physical movements (X, 2003). The ethnographic data of the study is based on the diaries that document the meetings with the informants during the fieldwork period. Diary-keeping and the analysis of the diaries is a method used widely in ethnographic studies to collect and arrange data based on the researcher's observations. Furthermore, informal interviews during observation deepened the observation in the field to better understand the inner perspective with perceptions and emotions (Patton, 2015). This study employs a qualitative methodology to research in exploring wide-ranging indigenous skills, (Browne et al., 2016). Since there is almost no study carried out on the role of a female *Tok Bomoh* (*Tok Biah*) and given the exceedingly oral cultures of the *Orang Asli*, a qualitative approach using ethnographic design and procedures, particularly with a case study design model was applied. Thus the most appropriate method for this study is in the form of in-depth interviews focusing on indigenous narratives was deemed to be appropriate in generating propositions that might be crucial for upcoming research on the roles of *Tok Bomohs*. In addition, informal and unstructured discussions and participant observation were also carried out (Menon, 2015). The method described here is semi-structured, open-ended interviews that have been recorded in full. The whole of each recording has been transcribed according to the process introduced by (Burnard, 1991).

Individual interview

For the individual interviews, *Tok Biah* is the main respondent. *Tok Biah's* real name is Seluang Binti Rabu. She lives at Batu 18, Kampung Seri Tanjung, Kahang. She is 70 years old and has 11 children. She came from Kampung Peta, in the district of Rompin and then migrated to Kampung Seri Tanjung, Kahang since 20 years ago. She is known as '*Tok Biah*' (the long name is '*Mak Rebiah*') because she is considered a shaman among the *Orang Asli Jakun* of Bekok. Her journey as a shaman started when people began believing that there are spirits that possessed her physical body and it made it possible for her to cure other people who have fallen ill. *Tok Biah* never learned any shaman practices on a formal basis. She obtained her shaman knowledge on her own which is through her own experiences.

The interview sessions with *Tok Biah* are carried out at *Tok Biah's* house and *Rumah Adat* (the official meeting place for Kampung Tamok's community) on 14 August 2018, 20 December 2018, 15 August 2019 and 17 December 2019. Four interview sessions were carried out with *Tok Biah* and each interview lasted for almost 2 hours. During the interview sessions, *Tok Biah* was accompanied by her son, Sayadin Bin Bujang who is also her assistant. Two interviewees were interviewed for every session and the questions were asked using the semi-structured method (snowball method). Comprehensive transcripts were gathered throughout each interview, and at the end of each day were written down and marked with preliminary remarks (Bedford, 2013). The interviews were conducted in Malay because all respondents can communicate very well in this language. During the observations and interview sessions, the interviewers sat close to the subject. The tools that are used for the interviews include hand phones (video recording and picture-taking purposes) and notebooks for taking down notes during the interviews. The main interviewer then transcribed the responses. It usually takes the interviewer a week to fully transcribed the interview.

Focus Group Discussion

For the focus group discussion, the respondents consist of a *Tok Batin* in one of the villages, a son of *Tok Biah* who is also a religious leader and *Ketua Adat* for Kampung Tamok and a

female villager as the third respondent. The interview sessions were carried out at Tok Batin's house on 24 July 2018, 8 Mac 2019 and 22 July 2019. Three interview sessions were carried out with the three respondents and each interview lasted for almost three hours. During the interview sessions, all three respondents were present. Three subjects were interviewed for every session and the questions were asked using the semi-structured method (snowball method). All responses were recorded using handphones and also taken down by hand by one of the interviewers. The main interviewer then transcribed the responses. It usually takes the interviewer a week to fully transcribed the interview (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The interviews were conducted with a protocol since they involved the important people in *Orang Asli* community. An interview protocol increases the effectiveness of an interview process by ensuring that all comprehensive information is obtained within the allocated time. it emphasized the routine components such as interview ethics, interviewing skills, questions construction and interview settings (Yeong et al., 2018).

Observation

The researchers also had conduction observation since this method is relevant in highlighting the roles of the important figure (Morgan et al., 2017). This method was chosen because rich data can be collected within a limited time. The respondents are encouraged to interact with each other and not merely respond to the moderator. In this way, the range and complexity of attitudes and beliefs can emerge. Focus groups also enable the researcher to take into account not only what is said but also gestures, facial expressions and other forms of non-verbal communication.

The third method was carried out by observing a specific activity performed by the *Orang Asli Jakun* which is the *Adat Tepung Tawar* over two years, 2018 to 2019 specifically on 13 July 2018 and 22 July 2019. These dates coincided with the annual celebration of the *Orang Asli* in Malaysia which is the *Hari Kebesaran Orang Asli Sedunia* (United Nation's International Day for Indigenous People). Each session lasts approximately two hours. The observations were carried out at *Keramat Datuk Simpang Keanan, Kampung Tamok, Bekok*. The researchers also took part in the ritual. Usually, only purification rituals are carried out on this auspicious occasion. *Tok Biah* and *Sayadin* start the ceremony by burning benzoin gum for incense and chanting prayers beside the river bank. The chanting performed by Tok Sayadin, is to ask for the safety of the village and the health of the villagers. *Tok Biah* and the villagers who participated in this ritual will then take a bath in the river for purification purposes. Tok Sayadin will then perform the adat *menepung tawar* on all visitors. The ritual will start with him pouring water mixed with flour on the head of the visitors while chanting prayers for their health and peaceful life. All visitors will go through the same ritual. Sometimes Tok Sayadin will be assisted by a few villagers when performing this act. Tok Biah commented :

Tok Biah :

"orang ini juga serupa, ajal mautnya baik-baik, jauh sakit-sakit dan mara bahaya"

Translated

All people are the same. Let them die in peace. Protect them from illnesses and danger. The rituals were recorded by using a hand phone and a camera. The researchers chose to observe this important ritual because it is a purification process that has many participants in

it. *Tok Biah* plays an important role during this ritual because she is the mediator between the villagers and God.

Tok Biah exemplifies the essential position that practitioners hold in the continuance of *Orang Asli adat* for this special occasion. Steering the cleansing and blessing ritual before the *Hari Kebesaran Orang Asli Sedunia* celebration solidified the affiliation links between the *Orang Asli* and *Tok Biah's* community, marked the occasion, and prepared the community and the space for the following period with a ritual that has been enacted for many generations. Therefore, these ceremonies could not be undertaken without the participation of a *bomoh*, shaman, and other traditional practitioners.

Besides performing purification rituals, *Tok Biah* also carried out rituals that are held before important events (such as *Hari Kebesaran*), or as a response to a need (such as an illness outbreak). This purification ritual was a part of the larger celebrations for the community and was intended to safeguard the inhabitants and ensure the ongoing health of the kampung and surrounding forest for the next season.

Findings and Discussion

The findings were based on the interview sessions, the focus group sessions and several observations that were carried out.

1. Geographical Data

At Bekok, there are six *Orang Asli* villages. Information about the name of villages, number of heads of households and number of household members are shown in Table 1. As of 18 July 2018, there are 367 houses and 1328 people living in all six *Orang Asli* villages. *Tok Biah* serves all people from the six villages and also any outsider who needs her help.

Table 1

List of Villages, Head of households and a total number of household members.

Village Name	Head of household / rumah	Number of household / members
Kampung Lenek	36	122
Kampung Tembayan	58t	204
Kampung Kudong	117	432
Kampung Tamok	61	210
Kampung Kemidak	53	190
Kampung Selai	42	170

Role of *Tok Biah* in the Relation of Custom and Belief As a Traditional Healer / Shaman

The practice of traditional healing is a continuous experience that has been part of the national healthcare systems of *Orang Asli* communities for many years. Traditional medicine and traditional healing procedures are part of the *Orang Asli* indigenous knowledge, ritual and practices. They use it from generation to generation for spirituality, health and longevity (Lambin et al., 2018). A shaman has a high status among the *Orang Asli* community. People refer to the shaman for treatment of both physical and non-physical illnesses. An *Orang Asli* shaman is not only popular among the people of the tribes but also among the Chinese and the Malays who believe in their healing powers. Being a shaman is considered as having a high rank and if he or she has a good reputation, then he or she will have his or her group of loyal followers.

A shaman's ritual includes worshipping and praying to a selected *keramat* (sacred object or location) to ask for the fulfillment of requests and to ask for recovery of illnesses. Steps in a particular ritual include the usage of natural resources like roots of plants, certain leaves and soil. For example, the roots of *the Pemadam* plant can be used to cure stomach aches using soaking the roots in water and drinking the water afterward.

Whenever *Tok Biah* treats her patients, she will place certain restrictions and the patients must obey them. Some of the restrictions are such as patients are not allowed to consume spicy or sour foods during the treatment period. For the Chinese and Indians, they are prohibited from consuming pork and any other meat which is considered unclean. They should also refrain from drinking alcoholic drinks.

"orang Melayu jumpa Tok, orang Cina jumpa Tok, orang India jumpa Tok. Minta tolong ubat. Tok tolong ubat la". Orang gaduh suami isteri, Tok ubat. Orang sakit perut, Tok ubat, orang nak kuat pun Tok ubat.

"Dulu kuat, Tok masuk hutan cari akar kayu, pucuk daun buat ubat. Tapi sekarang Tok tak kuat, Tok pakai doa jampi sahaja."

Tok baca doa (metera) dapat sendiri (ilham sendiri), Ada yang Tok dapat dari mimpi Tok.

Translated:

Malays come and see me, Chinese come to see me, and Indians come to see me. They want me to cure them. So I help them. When husband and wife fight with each other, I help them. People have a stomach aches, I help them. People want to feel strong, I help them.

I used to be stronger. I went to the jungle to look for roots, tree shoots for medicinal purposes. But now I am not strong. I use prayers and chants only.

I recite prayers that I obtained on my own. There are (prayers) that I also get from my dreams.



Figure 1: *Tok Biah* attending to her patient

Officiating Importance Events

Anyone interested in becoming a shaman is required to purify his body. The technique of purification is by having a flour bath every full moon. In addition, he is not allowed to eat any kind of meat that is considered unclean such as pork, dog meat and any type of carcass. The flour bathing ceremony is usually held in Keramat Batu 18, Kahang and sometimes in Keramat Sempang Keanan.

Tok Biah - “Susah mahu bersih (hati), bulan penuh, kena mandi tepung (tepung tawar), mandi tepung, tak boleh makan benda kotor. Tak boleh cakap tak baik...”

Translated: It's difficult to have a good heart, when there is a full moon, we have to carry out a flour bath, and we cannot eat 'dirty things'. Cannot talk about bad things....

Tok Biah's role is crucial for initiating the beginning ritual and reciting prayers. This practice is compulsory to be implemented so that the celebration can be carried out peacefully and safe from disturbance by bad spirits. It is a big challenge to become a *Tok Biah*, and it is a big risk especially when she has to confront people who don't like her. Besides treating sick people, *Tok Biah* also plays an important role during the new house or new land opening ceremony. The activity carried out for both activities is the same, which is to lead the ritual of praying and singing. For her important contributions to her community, *Tok Biah* never asked for any payment. It is said that the spirits don't like her to do so. If there is a specific request by *Tok Biah* such as being paid 25 cents and 3 yards of the white garment, it is the request of the spirits and not her request.

Tok Biah - Tok selalu mari sini (Bekok). Ikut jalan belakang dekat dari Kahang. Sini ramai anak cucu Tok. Semua anak beranak Tok (kenal dengan Tok)

Translated: I always come here (Bekok). I follow the back road from Kahang. Here I have many children and grandchildren. All are my family (know me).



Figure 2: Tok Sayaddin is conducting the *Upacara Mandi Tepung* on visitors

As a Mediator Between the Community and the God

The main role of *Tok Biah* is to treat people in need. Her method is by offering prayers, chanting and singing to the spirits. When *Tok Biah* was still healthy, she used natural resources from nearby trees when she treated her patients but nowadays, her health condition is becoming a barrier to continuing that. According to Sayadin, his mother can treat any sicknesses, diseases, or medical problems. After the treatments for the patients are complete, *Tok Biah* will perform a ritual as a sign that the treatment has come to an end.

Tok Sayadin: Tok Biah guna daun pokok. Tengoklah...pokok mana yang sesuai dengan jampi dia. Tapi sekarang dia dah susah nak buat. Dia dah tak berapa kuat. Mak saya boleh ubatkan semua sakit. Lepas habis ubat, Tok Biah buat penutup ubat.

Translated: Tok Biah uses tree shoots. It depends – on which tree is suitable for her prayers. But now it is difficult for her to prepare (medicine). She is not very strong. My mother can cure all illnesses. After the medicine is finished (for the patient), Tok Biah will prepare the final medicine.

Majlis Mandi Tepung

According to Sayadin (22 July 2019), every full moon, *Tok Biah* will send flour to a specific sacred place (*tempat keramat*) to purify her body. In addition, *Tok Biah* has to fast on that day and she has to refrain from eating certain meat (pork, dog and any other carcasses). This practice is necessary for the sake of getting assistance from the good spirit. Sayadin further commented that this shaman *Tok Biah* (*perbomohan*) can be succeeded by someone who has good behavior, is faithful to his or her spouse and is committed to having a flour bath at every full moon.



Figure 3: *Tok Biah* taking a bath in the river

Tok Biah performs her worship activities at the sacred place (*tempat keramat*) by singing, chanting and praising the spirit. Incantations have elements of symbolism that are visible through the usage of their language. They are important in influencing one's thinking to be better in their daily life as well as a member of a society (Penulis, 2016). These are considered as prayers, spells and requests to God, the Creator who takes care of the sacred place. Occasionally *Tok Biah* will also open up the *Quran*. In the belief of the *Orang Asli* people, the *Quran* refers to their religious book. However, they do not take the *Al-Quran*, as a revelation from Allah Almighty to Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. as believed by Muslims. This prayer chant demonstrates the role of *Tok Biah* as an intermediary between man and God. Below is an excerpt of such a chant by *Tok Biah*:

Oo...kami ni numpang saja. Oooi madi-madi la ramai dalam perahu. Dari kampong laman nan laut pulang ke laut nan gunung pulang ke gunung, suami aku atas perabung. Aku minta sabut, aku minta timun, Mak Biah orang bodoh, bingung. Ohh, hilai-hilai tatawa la mari. Ini kadeng... minta kebau, minta sadap kasi umat Muhamad yang banyak. Oh pergi kau babi, jangan kau mengacau la iding, beri anak kami laku. Sampai hati Mak Biah dah halau. Dah kau jahat, Mak Biah halau. Ini bulan baik, lapuk gunung bermain gunung bertabuh, biar lapok. Oooo. Mak Biah taun bila bulan bila kami ambik Mak Biah dalam mangkuk panas. Ini la semua cukup dalam dulang jadi iding, kami dalam dunia banyak susah. Main padang main padang, main gunung main la gunung. Dah tak sedih, kami ta.

Translated:

Oo, we are here temporarily. Let's all bathe in the boat. Those that come from the sea will return to the sea, and those that come from the mountain will return to the mountain. I request coconut husk; I request cucumber. Mak Biah is confused. Ohh, come here laughter. Request for buffalo, and give delicious food to Muhamad's followers. Oh go away pig, don't disturb our village, let our children be safe. I'm sorry for chasing you away but you are bad. This is our offering. In this world we are poor. Play in the field, play in the mountain, we are no longer sad.

The worship ritual starts with a prayer at the selected location or *keramat*. This step is carried out by the *Ketua Adat Orang Asli* before they are given a flour bath which is known as *menepung tawar*. The *Ketua Adat* will offer prayers for the safety, health and prosperity of the people who are being given the flour bath. The second step is these people will wash in the nearby river to get rid of their past sins. This ritual is carried out once a year usually in August and coincides with the *Hari Orang Asli Sedunia* celebrations. Even so, for *Tok Biah*, she will have her monthly flour bath for cleansing her body physically and spiritually. For the final step, she will refrain from eating unclean meat like pork and drinking alcohol for a specific length of time.

The *Mandi Tepung* ceremony will be performed by anyone who has wishes to be fulfilled. This ceremony is attended by the villagers and community who had wished, and are accompanied by their relatives and people who want to see how the ritual was conducted.

Conclusion

This research briefly described the shaman system and the ritual inherited by the *Orang Asli* of Bekok. The ongoing education system and the lack of understanding of the younger generation have slowly but surely made this heritage nearly vanished. But, it still needs to be implemented in certain situations. Thus, regardless of how the development will influence the people, the spiritual world will not stop from having its impact on its society.

Traditional healers are especially important to the *Orang Asli* because they understood health and treat illnesses in an integrated and embedded way, which aligned with the ontological understandings held by the community. *Tok Biah* as a shaman (bomoh) and a mediator is still an essential part of her community. Her abilities are not only appreciated by her people but also acknowledged by outsiders. Her prayers and chants proved the dependency of this community on the *keramat* and God to maintain the peace and safety of their villages.

The shaman serves as an important connection between the spirit and the human's need to pray to ask for anything from the Creator God. This is how the shaman and the worshipping institution are born. *Tok Biah* as a mediator herself has performed the rituals to her best ability to convey her patient's wish to God, leaving the rest up to the Divine to fulfil these wishes as they are beyond her control.

Even though, modern treatment at hospitals and clinics is still considered the first option among the modern *Orang Asli* people, *Tok Biah*'s contribution to the well-being of the people in her village and the surrounding villages is highly regarded. It has earned her the title "*Tok Biah Klinik Labis*". As mentioned by Sayidin, "my *Tok Biah* is Labis Clinic". Without any doubt, the rituals and practices carried out by *Tok Biah* are an important heritage that should be passed down to the younger generation and the next generation as a legacy that they should be proud of.

Limitations and Study Forward

Due to the tight schedule of *Tok Biah* as she also visits Kampung Peta in Pahang, interview sessions with her tend to be brief and infrequent. There is a wide range of topics that are related to her expertise in healing people physically and mentally. Therefore, the researchers will extend this study by focusing on the meaning of the prayer recitals of *Tok Biah* and the significance of each herb/tree shoot that she uses for her treatments.

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Authors Contribution

Author 1 and Author 2 had prepared questions and conducted the interviews while Author 3 analyzed the data. Authors 2 and 3 prepared the final article. The ratio of contributions of Author 1 is 40%, Author 2 and Author 3 are 30% each.

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