

Animism Belief in the Performance Art of Gabag Gelap among the Temiar Community in POS Blau, Gua Musang

Ain Salem, Hafis Simin, Nik Nur Azizah Nik Halman, Aisya Azhari, Nina Khairil, Najah Tuah, Azfar Amirawa

Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Terengganu, Malaysia

Email: nurulainsalem@gmail.com, nurazizahhalman@uniswa.edu.my, aisyaaazhari14@gmail.com, ninasyafiqa@gmail.com, najahtuah@gmail.com, azfaramirawa2@gmail.com

Corresponding Author Email: mohamadhafis@uniswa.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i5/25422> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i5/25422

Published Date: 23 May 2025

Abstract

Animism plays a significant role in the performance art of *Gabag*, a traditional practice among the Temiar community in Gua Musang, Kelantan. This performance art reflects a spirituality that has been passed down through generations. Although this tradition continues to be practiced, socioeconomic changes and external influences pose challenges to the preservation of animistic elements in *Gabag Gelap*. This study aims to understand how animism influences the lives of the Temiar people. The findings indicate that *Gabag Gelap* serves as a medium for communication with the supernatural, a tool for conflict resolution, and a means to restore balance within the community. The study also highlights the challenges of preserving animistic elements in this art form due to the adaptation of modern lifestyles among the Temiar tribe. In addition to contributing to broader discussions on indigenous knowledge systems and cultural sustainability, the study illuminates the anthropological, cultural, and spiritual aspects of this activity. NGOs that support indigenous rights, policymakers like JAKOA and the Ministry of Tourism, and educators seeking to incorporate local heritage into teaching. For the Temiar community, this documentation supports efforts to preserve *Gabag Gelap* as a living tradition and pass it on to the future generations. In conclusion, preservation strategies, documentation, cultural education, and community collaboration are crucial to ensure the continuity of *Gabag Gelap* as a cultural heritage of the Temiar tribe.

Keywords: Animism, *Gabag Gelap*, Orang Asli, Temiar, Performance Art

Introduction

The Orang Asli are the indigenous people who have inhabited Peninsular Malaysia for thousands of years, predating the arrival of the Malay and other ethnic groups. They are among the earliest settlers in the Malay Peninsula and possess unique cultures, languages, and beliefs. According to the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), there were approximately 178,000 Orang Asli in Malaysia in 2020, constituting less than 1% of the total population (JAKOA, 2020). Despite their small numbers, the Orang Asli play a crucial role in preserving Malaysia's cultural and ecological heritage.

The Orang Asli are divided into three main groups based on language, culture, and geographical location: Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay. Each group has smaller subgroups with distinct cultural identities. For example, the Negrito group includes tribes such as the Kensiu, Kintak, and Jahai, who primarily inhabit the northern regions of Peninsular Malaysia, such as Perak, Kedah, and Kelantan. The Senoi group, the largest of the three, includes tribes such as the Temiar, Semai, and Jah Hut, who mostly reside in the central regions of the peninsula, such as Perak, Pahang, and Kelantan. Meanwhile, the Proto-Malay group consists of tribes such as the Temuan, Jakun, and Semelai, who predominantly inhabit the southern and eastern coastal regions of Peninsular Malaysia (Nicholas, 2000).

The Temiar tribe, one of the Orang Asli groups belonging to the Senoi. They in particular inhabiting the interior region of Perak, Pahang and Kelantan, is well known for their way of life that is deeply connected to nature and their animistic beliefs system, which actually build the foundation of their culture (Roseman, 1991). One of the most prominent aspects of Temiar culture is their traditional performance art, *Gabag*. *Gabag* is a form of performance art that combines elements of dance, music, and ritual, often associated with healing ceremonies, community rituals, channel for spiritual communication with nature spirits and ancestors and expressions of their spiritual beliefs.

Gabag is not merely entertainment but an important medium for communication with spirits and ancestors. Traditional performance arts among the Orang Asli, including *Gabag*, often serve as tools to maintain harmonious relationships between humans, nature, and spirits (Roseman, 1991). In the context of the Temiar community, *Gabag* is often performed during significant ceremonies such as births, weddings, funerals, and healing rituals. The performance involves the use of traditional musical instruments such as drums, flutes, and gongs, as well as dance movements that mimic nature and animals.

Originally, *Gabag* was a healing ritual performed to cure illnesses caused by malevolent spirits. *Gabag* performances for this purpose can be conducted in two forms which is *Gabag Terang* and *Gabag Gelap*. Both are healing and religious rituals, *Gabag Terang* is performed in a bright setting and can be attended by the general public, while *Gabag Gelap* is performed in a dark setting which is more exclusive and only performed in specific contexts, involving deeper spiritual elements.

The *Gabag* performance is also closely tied to their animistic beliefs. According to Tylor (1871), animism is the belief that all things in nature, including plants, rocks, rivers, and animals, possess spirits or souls. This belief forms the foundation of the structure and rituals in *Gabag* performances, where every element is designed to communicate with the spirits of

nature and their ancestors. Therefore, in the *Gabag Gelap* performance, these elements are transformed into dance moves or symbols that serve as mediums for communication with the spiritual realm. Hence, it is important to understand that this performance art is a representation of the Temiar cosmological system and their belief in the harmony between humans and their environment, rather than only as an entertainment.

Despite the rich cultural heritage of Malaysia's indigenous communities, there are still limited studies with of the more profound spiritual and performative aspects of Orang Asli customs. *Gabag Gelap* is a crucial cosmological practice with deep roots in animistic beliefs, in addition to being a rare ritual performance among the Temiar. The growing threats of modernization, cultural deterioration, and the declining transmission of oral traditions make it important to explore and documents this ritual.

This study is important as it emphasizes how important it is to view indigenous performance as a complex, embodied story of belief, healing, and collective identity rather than just a folklore or artistic expression. This research justifies the importance of conserving lesser-known ritual forms that are underrepresented in both local policy discourses and international anthropological literature.

Furthermore, by using a performance based ethnographic approach to engage with intangible cultural elements, ritual structure, symbolisme, and spiritual cosmology that are frequently left out of traditional anthropological analysis, this study also advances methodological innovation. Repositioning Temiar ritual knowledge within scholarly and cultural frameworks that affirm indigenous epistemologies as valid, dynamic systems of meaning is what makes it significant.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative method based on an ethnographic approach. The primary focus of the study was to gather information through fieldwork in the Orang Asli community in Gua Musang, with the main objective of obtaining primary data as the main source. Additionally, secondary data was collected from various sources such as journals, books, and academic articles to support and strengthen the primary data. The combination of both types of data facilitated a more comprehensive explanation of the research issue. The ethnographic approach was used throughout the fieldwork, where researchers were directly involved with the local community. Data was collected through interactions with several villagers, including traditional leaders such as the *Tok Batin* and *Tok Penghulu*, as well as other local residents. This approach allowed researchers to obtain direct and in-depth information from selected informants. To ensure a thorough understanding of the research issue, researchers spent approximately one month with the informants conducting detailed observations and interviews. The study involved three informants labeled as IR1, IR2, and IR3. Primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, enabling researchers to understand the context and dynamics of animism in *Gabag Gelap* performances. Additionally, secondary data was collected from relevant literature, including journals, books, and academic articles discussing animism and traditional performance arts, particularly *Gabag Gelap*. The data obtained from interviews and literature reviews were then analyzed using NVivo 12 software. The use of this software facilitated the classification of data according to predetermined themes (Thematic Analysis). The combination of primary and

secondary data allowed researchers to present the findings in a more detailed, in-depth, and comprehensive manner, providing a holistic view of the role of animism in *Gabag Gelap* performances.

The Performance Art of Gabag Gelap

The performance art of *Gabag Gelap* is a highly significant ritual in the spiritual and social life of the Temiar tribe, particularly in the context of traditional healing and communication with supernatural powers. This performance is usually held at night in complete darkness, as this setting is believed to be conducive for contacting spirits and supernatural forces that can assist in the healing process or resolve specific community issues. *Gabag Gelap* is part of the oral tradition of the Temiar tribe, passed down from generation to generation, and it has a unique structure and function in their social and spiritual life.

According to a study by Sahar Sa'di Hashim (2020), *Gabag Gelap* involves several key elements such as singing, dancing, and the use of traditional musical instruments like the *chantuk* (a bamboo instrument). The performance is led by the *Tok Bellian* or *Tok Halaq*, an individual considered to be a mediator between humans and supernatural powers. The *Tok Bellian* leads the performance by singing special chants believed to summon specific spirits to assist in the healing process or provide protection to the community. The *Tok Bellian* is also said to have the ability to communicate directly with these spirits through dreams or spiritual experiences. The structure of the *Gabag Gelap* performance typically begins with careful preparation, including the setup of the *paro* (performance stage) decorated with specific leaves and flowers believed to possess magical powers. The *paro* is constructed using natural materials such as bamboo and palm leaves, symbolizing the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The *Tok Bellian* and their assistants, including the *Tok Pek Ta* (advisor and guardian of the *Tok Bellian*) and the *chantuk* players, begin the performance with singing and dancing accompanied by the rhythmic beats of the *chantuk*. The songs sung by the *Tok Bellian* contain lyrics referring to specific spirits such as the spirit of flowers, the spirit of the eagle, the spirit of human souls, the spirit of the tiger, and the spirit of the hornbill. Each spirit is believed to have a different role and power in aiding the healing process or providing protection.

The *Gabag Gelap* performance also involves the use of specific symbols that hold deep meaning in the Temiar tribe's beliefs. For example, the use of certain flowers and leaves in the decoration of the *paro* symbolizes the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Additionally, the personal adornments worn by the *Tok Bellian* and their assistants also carry their own symbolism, such as the *tempok* (headpiece) made from specific flowers believed to enhance the *Tok Bellian's* spiritual power. The *tempok* is not merely an ornament but is also considered a tool that helps the *Tok Bellian* communicate with the summoned spirits.

The *Gabag Gelap* performance is not just a healing ritual but also serves as a medium for communication between humans and supernatural powers. Through this performance, the Temiar tribe believes they can restore spiritual and physical balance within their community. Furthermore, the performance also plays a role in maintaining harmony between humans and nature, where every element of nature, such as flora and fauna, is respected and incorporated

into the ritual. This belief reflects the Temiar tribe's worldview, which sees nature as a living entity with spirits that must be respected.

Overall, the *Gabag Gelap* performance is a complex and highly symbolic ritual that reflects the Temiar tribe's beliefs and close relationship with nature and supernatural powers. This performance is not only a tool for healing but also a medium for maintaining spiritual and social harmony within their community. Through this ritual, the Temiar tribe not only treats physical illnesses but also restores spiritual and emotional balance within individuals and their community.

Animism Beliefs of the Temiar Community

The Temiar community, part of the Senoi group, adheres to animism, the belief that everything in nature, including plants, animals, rocks, and rivers, possesses a spirit or soul. According to Tylor (1871), animism is the foundation of the belief system of indigenous peoples who view nature as a living entity that must be respected and revered. For the Temiar people, nature is not just a physical resource for daily needs but also a spiritual entity with the power to influence human life. For example, the spirit of the forest is believed to provide protection and abundant forest resources, while the spirit of the river is thought to provide clean water and plentiful fish. This belief influences how they interact with their environment, as they constantly strive to maintain a harmonious relationship with the spirits of nature through various rituals and ceremonies.

The Temiar people believe that every element of nature has a spirit that can influence human life, either positively or negatively. For instance, the spirit of a large tree in the forest is believed to provide protection to the village, while the spirit of a hill or mountain is thought to provide strength and tranquility. According to Endicott (1979), this belief encourages the Temiar people to respect their environment and avoid any activities that could disrupt the balance of nature.

In addition to nature spirits, the Temiar people also believe in the existence of ancestral spirits. Ancestral spirits are considered guardians and protectors of the community, constantly watching over and influencing the lives of their descendants. Ancestral spirits are believed to provide advice, protection, and blessings to the community. Therefore, the Temiar people often hold ceremonies and rituals to worship and communicate with their ancestral spirits. These ceremonies typically involve offerings of food, drink, and prayers as a sign of respect and a request for assistance.

Ancestral spirits are also believed to play a crucial role in maintaining the well-being of the community. For example, if someone in the community falls ill or has an accident, the Temiar people believe that the ancestral spirits may be displeased with the individual's behavior or the community as a whole. Therefore, healing ceremonies or special rituals are held to apologize and restore a good relationship with the ancestral spirits. According to Roseman (1991), these ceremonies often involve elements such as dance, music, and singing, aimed at summoning the ancestral spirits and seeking their assistance.

In addition to healing ceremonies, marriage and death ceremonies are also important aspects of Temiar life. Marriage ceremonies involve offerings of food and drink to the ancestral spirits,

as well as dances and songs to seek blessings for the newlyweds. Meanwhile, post-death ceremonies involve rituals to ensure that the spirit of the deceased can rest peacefully and not disturb the community. According to Endicott (1979), these ceremonies often involve offerings of food and prayers as a sign of respect for the deceased spirit.

The animism beliefs of the Temiar people influence every aspect of their lives, from their interactions with nature to their community rituals and ceremonies. They believe that everything in nature has a spirit, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with these spirits is essential for the well-being of the community. Ancestral spirits are considered guardians and protectors, while shamans play a crucial role as mediators between the human world and the spirit world. Rituals and ceremonies are an integral part of Temiar life, aimed at worshiping the spirits of nature and ancestors, seeking protection, healing, and blessings. This belief system is not just a set of beliefs but also the foundation of their way of life, social interactions, and cultural expressions.

Animism Beliefs in the Performance Art of Gabag Gelap

Animism plays a crucial role in the performance art of *Gabag Gelap* among the Temiar tribe. Animism, as a belief system that holds that all things, whether living or non-living, possess a spirit or soul, forms the basis of all ritual activities and ceremonies conducted by the Temiar tribe. In the context of *Gabag Gelap*, animism is reflected in the close relationship between humans and nature, as well as their belief in supernatural powers that are believed to control their lives.

According to IR1, in an interview about *Gabag Gelap*, this practice involves the worship of nature spirits, which is a key aspect of animism. He emphasized that these spirits are summoned in complete darkness, and only those involved in the ritual are allowed to be present. IR1 also stated that the spirits will come when called, and those not involved in the ritual are not allowed to see or interfere with the process.

"Gabag gelap ini saya sudah apa ini. Saya beri penerangan dulu sewang gelap ni dia sebenarnya dia satu apa ni orang cakap pemujaan. Memuja bila memuja muja ini kebanyakannya dia bergantung kepada roh hantu, roh pokok, roh apa apalah." (ir1)

IR1 explained that *Gabag Gelap* is a form of worship involving spirits such as ghosts, tree spirits, and others. This clearly shows the connection to animism, where the community believes that everything, including trees and the environment, has a spirit or soul that must be respected and worshiped.

IR2 emphasized that the practice of *Gabag Gelap* requires a specific setting to worship certain spirits, which is part of animism. He explained that a dark and quiet environment is essential to ensure that the spirits can be effectively summoned.

"Jadi itulah dia kena bersewang di dalam gelap untuk memuja apa ni kata roh, dan perlu buat dalam keadaan senyap. Tak boleh ada bunyi suara." (IR2)

IR2 mentioned that the practice of *Gabag Gelap* requires a calm and dark environment to worship certain spirits. This indicates that the practice involves spiritual elements closely tied

to animism, where nature spirits and supernatural beings are considered entities that must be worshiped and respected.

Another important aspect of *Gabag Gelap* is the use of songs created based on dreams. According to Marina (1993), the Temiar tribe believes that dreams are a medium for receiving messages from spirits or supernatural powers. The songs sung during *Gabag Gelap* often contain lyrics referring to spirits such as the spirit of flowers, the spirit of the eagle, the spirit of the tiger, and the spirit of human souls. These songs are not just for entertainment but are part of the healing process and communication with the supernatural world. For example, the "*Spirit of Flowers*" song sung during *Gabag Gelap* is believed to summon the spirit of flowers to assist in the healing process (Sahar Sa'di Hashim, 2020).

IR3 explained that the songs used in *Gabag Gelap* are created by spirits. These songs serve as a call to specific spirits to come to the *sewang* hall. Once the spirits are summoned, offerings consisting of flowers and other items are prepared as a sign of respect to the spirits.

"Dia lagu yang pakai dalam sewang ni dicipta oleh roh. Tok halaq menyanyikan lagu tu je. Sewang itu berbentuk panggilan, bila dia sewang lagu dia panggil apa ni roh itu datang ke dewan sewang. Di situ dia orang akan buat jamuan. Jamuan ini berbentuk bunga-bunga dan sebagainya." (IR3)

IR3 emphasized that these songs are not ordinary songs but are created by spirits, indicating that the practice involves direct interaction with spiritual entities. The *Tok Halaq*, as the ritual leader, plays a crucial role in ensuring that these songs are sung correctly to summon the spirits. This shows that *Gabag Gelap* has deep spiritual elements, where songs and offerings are used as mediums to communicate with nature spirits. This is a characteristic feature of animism, where nature spirits are considered entities that must be respected and worshiped through specific rituals.

In addition, the *Gabag Gelap* performance also involves the use of traditional musical instruments such as the *chantuk*, made from bamboo. This instrument is not just a tool for producing sound but is also considered a medium for communicating with spirits. According to Ramle (2001), in the animism beliefs of the Temiar tribe, every object used in rituals has its own spirit, and musical instruments like the *chantuk* are considered sacred tools capable of connecting humans with the supernatural world.

The *Gabag Gelap* performance also involves the use of symbols related to nature. For example, the *paro* (performance stage) is decorated with leaves and flowers believed to possess their own spirits. The use of these symbols is not just for decoration but is part of the ritual process to summon these spirits to assist in the ceremony. According to Sahar Sa'di Hashim (2020), every element in the *Gabag Gelap* performance has its own meaning and function closely tied to the animism beliefs of the Temiar tribe.

Furthermore, *Gabag Gelap* also involves the role of the *Tok Bellian*, an individual who acts as a medium between humans and spirits. The *Tok Bellian* is believed to have the ability to communicate with spirits and supernatural powers through the songs and dances performed. During the *Gabag Gelap* performance, the *Tok Bellian* enters a trance or altered state, where

they are believed to communicate directly with spirits to seek assistance in the healing process or to ward off malevolent spirits disturbing the community (Sahar Sa'di Hashim, 2020).

In conclusion, the animism beliefs of the Temiar tribe form the foundation of all their ritual activities and ceremonies, including *Gabag Gelap*. This performance is not just a form of art but a medium for communicating with the supernatural world and restoring balance within the community. Through *Gabag Gelap*, the Temiar tribe demonstrates their close relationship with nature and their belief in supernatural powers that control their lives. Every element in this performance, from the songs and musical instruments to the symbols used, has its own meaning and function closely tied to their animism beliefs.

Conclusion

Animism plays a significant role in the performance art of *Gabag Gelap* among the Temiar tribe. This belief reflects the close relationship between the Temiar people and their environment, as well as the spirits that inhabit it. The *Gabag Gelap* performance is not just entertainment but also a medium for communicating with ancestral spirits and supernatural beings believed to influence their daily lives. Through this performance, the Temiar people show respect and seek protection from these spirits, as well as maintain a balance between the physical and spiritual worlds. Social changes, modern influences, and globalization have caused this practice to become increasingly marginalized. However, animism and the *Gabag Gelap* performance must be preserved and passed down as they are part of the identity and cultural heritage of the Temiar tribe. Efforts to preserve this practice are not only important for ensuring cultural continuity but also for maintaining a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

This study makes a significant contribution in terms of theory and context in the field of cultural anthropology, particularly in understanding the role of animism in traditional performance arts. Theoretically, this study fills a gap in the existing literature by providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between animism and *Gabag Gelap* performances, as well as enriching academic knowledge about Temiar culture. This is important as it offers new perspectives and helps build a more inclusive theory regarding the beliefs and traditional practices of the Orang Asli community. Overall, this study is important in advancing academic and practical understanding of animism and *Gabag Gelap* performances among the Temiar tribe. It has broad implications for the cultural, tourism, and development sectors of the Orang Asli in Malaysia.

Acknowledgement

The researcher would like to express her appreciation and thanks to the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education for the sponsorship of the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) under Project ID (432414-462187) and reference number (FRGS/1/2022/WAB08/UNISZA/02/1) for funding and support them to realize the publication of this article. In addition, the researcher would like to express his infinite gratitude for the support and assistance whether directly or indirectly involved for this article to be published.

References

- Endicott, K. M. (1979). *Batek Negrito religion: The world-view and rituals of a hunting and gathering people of Peninsular Malaysia*. Clarendon Press.
- Asli, J. K. O. (JAKOA). (2020). *Laporan tahunan JAKOA 2020*. Kementerian Kemajuan Desa dan Wilayah Malaysia.
- Marina, R. (1993). *Dream songs and healing among the Temiar of Malaysia*. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 24(1), 120-134.
- Nicholas, C. (2000). *The Orang Asli and the contest for resources: Indigenous politics, development and identity in Peninsular Malaysia*. IWGIA.
- Ramle, A. (2001). *Peralihan Ekonomi Masyarakat Orang Asli Terengganu Satu Sudut Ekonomi Persekutaran*. Tesis Doktor Falsafah. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Roseman, M. (1991). *Healing sounds from the Malaysian rainforest: Temiar music and medicine*. University of California Press.
- Hashim, S. (2020). *Pengaruh alam dan kepercayaan dalam muzik Gabag suku kaum Temiar: Kajian kes di Kampung Merlong, Gua Musang* (Tesis Doktor Falsafah). Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin.
- Tylor, E. B. (1871). *Primitive culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art, and custom*. John Murray.
- Benjamin, G. (2002). *Indigenous religions and belief systems of the Senoi peoples in Malaysia*. *Journal of Ethnographic Studies*, 15(4), 210-238.