

Chapter 15

Indigenous Traditional Healthcare Practices and Acceptance of Mainstream Healthcare Services: A Case Study in Gombak Orang Asli Village, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Undeniably, Indigenous people's (traditional) healthcare practices often proffer great importance to social health alongside the knowledge of longevity for current and future generations and an indelible part of modern Bioprospecting. In response to this issue, this study explores the traditional healthcare practices among Orang Asli (OA) while understanding their acceptance and integration of the modern public mainstream healthcare system. A qualitative study was conducted on 13 OAs residents in Selangor region. The findings revealed that traditional health care practices considered a core of their identity, culture, and heritages comprised of native intelligence and ecological knowledge instead of scientific and technological approaches. Participants reported a mixed perception of adopting modern healthcare practices and viewed modern mainstream healthcare practices as a final remedy for a life-threatening illness. However, they demonstrated a sensitive reaction in combining it into their life practices due to toxicity and negative modernization.

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BACKGROUND OF THE ORANG ASLI

Orang Asli is a native community known as ‘Bumiputera’, which means “the prince of land or “sons of the soil” as they have a unique life and are famous for carrying out practices in their traditional customs. According to a report by the Department of Orang Asli Development in 2020, Orang Asli represented about 206,777 of the total population (JAKOA, 2020). There are three main ethnic groups representing the Orang Asli population in Malaysia: Negrito, Senoi, and Malay Proto. Negrito ethnicity consists of 6 sub-tribal groups: Kensiu, Kintaq, Jahai, Mendriq, Bateq, and Lanoh. Consequently, the Senoi ethnic group consists of 6 tribal groups, namely: Temiar, Semai, Jah Hut, Che Wong, Semaq Beri and Mah Meri, while the Proto Malay Ethnicity consists of 6 sub-ethnic groups: Temuan, Jakun, Semelai, Orang Kuala, Orang Seletar and Orang Kanaq. The division of this category is based on physical aspects, and customs practiced, and the language used by the community (Seow, 2013).

The Semai community are involved in practices such as agricultural activities, managing rubber, and producing their own oil from palm plantation sources or cocoa., about 40% of the indigenous population live near or in the forest area. This population consists of Semai, Temiar, Che Wong, Jah Hut, Semoq Beri, and Mah Meri. Majority of Semai dominated a larger area, originating from the central part of Perak to the more distant inhabited areas south of the border Selangor. They mostly involve in cultivation (cultivation of hillside rice terraces). They also sell foraged jungle plant or animal resources such as smelly beans’ petai’, durian, rattan, and resin to earn their household income (Mohamad Pirdaus, Muhamad Sayuti, & Mohamad Hafis, 2021). However, a large group of this settlement resides in urban areas where they can mingle with the general population and are employed in commercial industries, eco-tourism or are self-employed (Masron, 2013).

A few studies have reported that, apart from health benefit, OA’s traditional practises provide important societal and economic values, i.e., plants such as Zingiberaceae, Marantaceae, Leguminosae, Vitaceae, Lamiaceae, Melastomataceae, and Araceae discovered by such practices, contain novel compounds that can treat various physical diseases and psychological illness (Lambin et al.,2018). Further, Ullah (2013) mentioned that indigenous traditional medicine and health care practices are a crucial preferred short-term or long-term remedy, as non-indigenous groups only use it in middle-income and least developing countries to meet their primary health care needs. Nonetheless, OA customs engage in certain traditional practices during postpartum for new mothers, some of which involve the use of herbs known as *Centella Asiatica*, which are often boiled, and the infusion is used for the mothers. It is reported to help cure jaundice and stomach ache (Samuel et al., 2010).

In Malaysia, the knowledge of health care and traditional medicine practices among Semai people is under-documented. Despite being one of the largest tribes, few studies have explored the social anthropological and dietary habits aspects of the Semai people (Zainon & Ong, 1997). Fatan Hamamah (2015) noted that historically, the Semai community is peaceful, known for its nonviolent consumption of fish and land animals as the main protein source in their dietary practices. Meanwhile, they rarely eat certain type of sea animals such as squid and cockles; similarly, they also avoid eating snake, a belief similar to that of Hinduism and Buddhishim the animist traditions, as they have a spiritual belief that snake is considered as a powerful thunder deity called ‘*Enku*’ (Robarchek & Dentan, 1987). Therefore, a python is considered a source of energy and it is used to serve in traditional medicine practices and ritual ceremonies for health and wellbeing purposes. Apart from the python, birds, macaques (usually the crab-eating macaque), rhinos, and monitor lizards are used for health remedies (Fatan Hamamah, 2015).

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