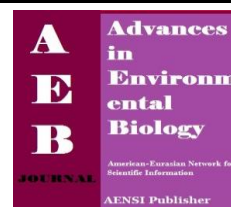




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Illness Perception and Healing Practices among the Batek Tribe in Kuala Koh, Kelantan, Malaysia

¹Ramle Abdullah, ²Amran Ahmed, ³Lua Pei Lin, ³Aryati Ahmad, ¹Asmawi Ibrahim, ⁴Nur Hafizah Ramle and ⁵Mohd Sukhairi Mat Rasat

¹Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia.

²Institute of Engineering Mathematics, Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), Pau Putra Campus, 02600 Arau, Perlis, Malaysia.

³Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), City Campus, 20400 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia.

⁴Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Bachok Campus, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia.

⁵Faculty of Earth Science, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Jeli Campus, 17600 Jeli, Kelantan, Malaysia.

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ABSTRACT

The Orang Asli is one of the indigenous ethnic groups in Malaysia, with its majority residing within outskirt and rural areas. Such a settlement distribution pattern largely influences their culture including the aspects of medicinal practices. Although they are exposed to modernisation elements by the Malaysian government, part of the culture and traditional lifestyles especially in the aspects of illnesses healing are still largely practiced. Studies were carried out towards the Batek tribe in Kuala Koh, Kelantan to examine two (2) questions; (i) what are their perceptions towards the causes of illnesses? And (ii) what are the approaches taken in treating illnesses? During the research, participation observation and interview techniques were applied in the data gathering process. Documents produced by previous researchers were also analyzed as a basis for focus discussions related to the issues at hand. The results showed that the Batek tribe believes that sickness suffered by individuals stems from two (2) factors. First, factors related to spiritual elements such as harassment by the supernatural powers and faint-heartedness. Second, physical factors related to changes in natural phenomenon and human negligence in exploiting natural resources. Based on these beliefs the Batek tribe possesses two approaches in treating illnesses. First, through means of faith-healing, for sickness believed to originate from spiritual factors. Second, the application of herbs obtained from forests surrounding their settlements.

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INTRODUCTION

The Orang Asli are an indigenous ethnic group found in Peninsular Malaysia and are known as a backward community, most of them living in isolation in the jungles of the Malay Peninsula [10]. As of 2011 the total Orang Asli population in Malaysia amounted to 178,197 people. They consist of three (3) large groups; the Negrito, Senoi and the Proto-Malays [3]. The Senoi is the largest group with a total of 97,856 people (54.91%), followed by the Proto-Malays to a total of 75,332 people (42.27%) and Negrito with a total of 5,009 people (2.81%) [12].

Each of these three (3) large groups consists of six (6) sub-tribes. The Negrito group consists of the Kintak, Kensiu, Jahai, Medrik, Batek and Lanoh sub-tribes. The Senoi group consists of the Semai, Temiar, Jah-het, Semaq Beri, Ma'Betise', and Chewong while the Proto-Malays consists of the Temuan, Jakun, Semelai, Orang Seletar, Orang Kuala and Orang Kanaq sub-tribes [20]. This classification of sub-tribes is based on the language dialect spoken. However, between each of the tribes there is no clear separator in terms of settlement areas due to the existence of inter-marriage practices among tribe members [2].

The Batek is a tribe from the Negrito group. Their settlements are concentrated within rural areas of the states of Kelantan, Pahang and a small portion of Terengganu. According to Endicott [5], the Batek tribe of Kelantan are known as Batek De and Batek Teh while the Batek tribes of other states have other distinctive names to be known by. The Batek tribe that resides around Sungai Sat, Pahang are known as Batek Iga while the

Corresponding Author: Ramle Abdullah, Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia.
Tel: +6019-9345586 E-mail: ramle@unisza.edu.my

ones in Hulu Besut, Terengganu are known as Batek Te. This classification of sub-tribes is based upon the dialect of the language spoken. However, between each of the tribes there is no clear separator in terms of settlement areas due to the existence of inter-marriage practices among tribe members [2].

The lifestyle of the Batek is largely influenced by the ecological systems within the vicinity of their settlement areas surrounded by forests, hills and rivers [5,15,16]. Economic activities are generally carried out based upon the natural environment with focus on activities such as hunting and collecting forest products [16]. This is also the case with non-material cultural aspects such as thought patterns, belief systems, customs, arts, diet, health and medical care; all are closely inter-related with the local environment [22]. This situation is explained by Ramle *et al.*, [23] through the following diagram in Figure 1.

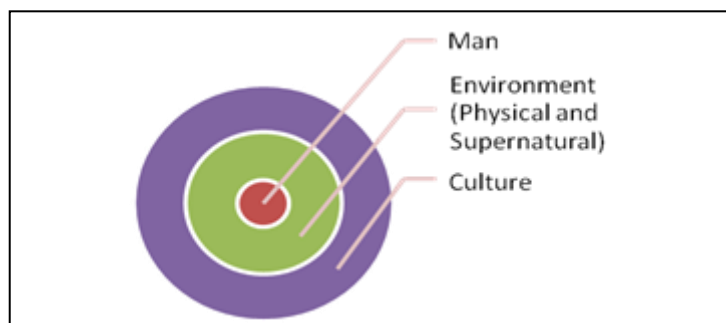


Fig. 1: Environmental influence on the culture.

The Batek tribe believes that nature as found within the vicinity of their settlements is a gift from the supernatural powers for the wellbeing of mankind. It is from this nature that human obtain food, medicine, construction materials and other tools used in performing daily activities [16]. Thus, man must explore them accordingly based on the rules set by the supernatural powers. Any improper conduct or violation of taboo will be punished by the Deity [5].

Such a belief pattern largely influences the community change process. Although they have been exposed to the outside world as well as modernisation, but the acceptance towards it is somehow not that encouraging. Here is a prime example on healthcare issues: although the Malaysian government has introduced elements of modern medicine via the mobile clinic on a monthly basis, the response from the community towards such programmes is at a very low level [18]. Most members of the community still prefer to adopt the traditional methods of treatment.

Background of Issue:

Orang Asli communities living in rural areas of Peninsular Malaysia have been introduced to modern medicine since the early 1950s. The British colonial rule over Malaysia (known as Malaya back then) had given attention towards health issues among the Orang Asli community. Carey [3] state that the health status among the Orang Asli circa 1950s were at poor level. Among the diseases that were widespread among the community back then was malaria and leprosy. After Malaysia gained its Independence in 1957 a much more serious attention was given by the Malaysian government towards this issue. Circa the 1960s and early 1970s a number of facilities were provided towards improving health levels among the Orang Asli. Among others were; (i) establishing a special hospital for the Orang Asli in Gombak (approximately 20 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur). The hospital established provides complete treatment facilities i.e. 450 patient beds, five (5) full-time doctors, a number of hospital assistants and nurses [3] (ii) creating more than 140 health posts in Orang Asli settlements within rural areas, (iii) providing helicopter landing zones for each related health post to facilitate the transfer of patients requiring further treatment in the special hospital in Gombak [3].

Healthcare facilities for the Orang Asli were further enhanced from time to time involving a considerable amount of expenditure. For example, the plan for 2011-2015 involves an average annual cost of RM 35.55 million for related purposes. Among the main focus of spending is to provide comprehensive treatment services to all Orang Asli, improve facilities of the mobile clinic, flying doctor service programme, programme to detect and mitigate a variety of ailments, deliver health education programme, nutritional rehabilitation programme, increase the number of health clinics and rural clinics as well as improving hospital services quality [12].

Although health treatment services have been provided for quite some time now, the Department of Orang Asli Development or *Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli* (JAKOA) admits that up until now Orang Asli health is still at a low level [12]. There are a number of diseases that are synonymous and spread among the Orang Asli community, among them malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, malnutrition, skin diseases and worms. In recent times

the Orang Asli community have also been vulnerable to new diseases such as HIV, other sexual transmitted diseases and hypertension [12].

These problems are believed to result from several factors. Among them are the factors of attitude and acceptance of the local Orang Asli residents towards modern medicine. One thing that stands out is that there exist a very large gaps between the traditional medicinal system inherited and practiced with the modern medicine system introduced to them. Thus, a study was made to witness the tendency within medicinal practices, and elements of syncretism related to the medicinal practices within the Orang Asli community by selecting the case among the Batek tribe in Kuala Koh, Kelantan.

Objectives:

This study was done to achieve two (2) main objectives, namely; (i) to clarify the views of the Batek tribe regarding causes of illnesses, and (ii) to determine the approach taken by the Batek tribe in treating illnesses suffered by community members. Information and discussions related to both objectives will hence be an indicator in understanding the question on to why the Orang Asli community in particular the Batek tribe lack on practicing modern medicine as a method of healthcare.

Literature Review:

There have been a number of researchers that have previously elaborated on the belief systems of the Orang Asli tribes. In order for this they had also explained upon the views of certain tribes regarding the causes of disease. Among these researchers are Endicott [4,5,24,8,11,13,20,21].

Endicott [4] who conducted studies on the Batek tribes of Kelantan explained, the Batek believe that their lives are dominated by a supernatural power. Every phenomenon linked to nature and humans are directly related to the supernatural power which is named *Hala' Asal*. This power is believed to have outlined the social order as a guide for human life and then created the *lawac* (a concept of taboo). A Batek who has violated the *lawac* would result in the wrath of the *hala'*, and in return will be punished with occurrence of accidents, deaths, injuries and illnesses. A similar view was presented by Ramle and Suda [22] and Asmawi [1]. As explained, one will be stricken with illnesses if violating the *lawac'*, whether the *lawac'* is related to the exploitation of food sources or even the aspects of relationships between humans and other natural elements.

Wazir [24] in her study towards the Ma'Betese' Orang Asli tribe also touches on its tribal belief systems. One aspect of concern by Wazir [24] is about the ideology of the Ma' Betise' in the context of human relationships with nature. Two essential concepts were revealed in the beliefs of the Ma' Betise' i.e. the concepts of *tulah* (customary domination of humans on animals and nature) and *kemali'* (customary domination of animals and nature on humans). *Tulah* often exists in hunting activities, fishing and gathering of forest products. Animals and plants are believed to possess *moyang* (ancestors) and spirits. Therefore humans must abide to the set rules in exploiting the natural resources. If man hunts and gathers excessively, man will be *tenong* (cursed) by the *moyang* and spirits of the animals and plants surrounding its environment. Human will be adversely affected by illnesses as well as death.

Hood [8] also indicated the Semelai community's belief towards the existence of 'God' that created the Universe. The Semelai believe in the concept of sin (*pakak*) when one does bad and prohibited acts. They also believe in the existence of guardians/spirits such as tree, mountain and rock guardians. The Semelai also believe in the spirits called *sekok* (good or malevolent spirits). In addition they also believe in the *semangat* spirits. Human have taboos in relation to the spiritual realm and physical world [9]. Once these taboos have been violated, the human will be prone to accidents that may result in a variety of illnesses.

Howell [11] on the Chewong community also touches on the aspects raised by Wazir [24]. Among other things he explained the Chewong community ideology in the context of relationships between humans and the environment (world). Howell explained that there is a single form of social order that determines the pattern of their relationship. Violation of the set social order will cause punishments either in the forms of *talaiden*, *tolah* or *tika*. Ramle [22,23] in his study explains that the Semaq Beri community believes that human are dominated by *Tohan*. It is *Tohan* which determines the regulations to humans in communicating with the environment; human, plants, animals and other environmental elements. Human will receive punishment either in the forms of *bereh*, *celau* or *tolah* once the order is violated, and will encounter calamities or illnesses as retribution.

Discussions related to medicinal methods among the Orang Asli community were also carried out by previous researchers. Most of the discussions were carried out indirectly or as a sub-topic in the explanations related to the belief systems of certain communities. Among the discussions that were more focused relating to medicinal systems was one carried out by Hood [8]. He described faith-healing as an instrumental institution within the Orang Asli from the Semelai tribe. Through this system the witch-doctor/shaman played a role in making contact with the supernatural powers in curing the illness of an individual affected [14]. In the context of making contact with the supernatural powers Endicott [5] furthermore explains on how the witch-doctor within the Batek tribe have a number of means in making contact with the supernatural powers; from simply reciting incantations to holding a full ritual ceremony. A similar situation also exists among the Semaq Beri tribe

[22,23]. Rituals are regarded as a special method provided by community members in making contact with the supernatural powers with aims to cure illnesses of individuals as well as cleansing a whole village from all offenses and sins.

In addition, the use of plants and animals are also synonymous methods in the medicinal systems of the Orang Asli. Ong [17] explains that there are 56 plants species commonly used by the Orang Asli community within the Endau-Rompin National Park, Malaysia to cure many types of illnesses. The same situation also exists among the Semelai tribe [8] and Semaq Beri [20]. For the Semelai tribe the plant intake for medicinal purposes should be done with caution, by reciting incantations seeking permission from the supernatural powers.

In summary, previous studies show most Orang Asli communities believe that illnesses originate from the supernatural powers. Humans are susceptible to illnesses if they do not adhere to the set taboos. Therefore, this paper will show a more focused view of the Batek tribe in Kuala Koh National Park, Kelantan in relation to the causes of illnesses as well as the medicinal systems practiced.

Methodology:

The content of this paper is the fieldwork findings carried out towards the Batek tribe which still practices semi-nomadic lifestyles in Kuala Koh National Park, Kelantan particularly around the river confluence areas of Sungai Koh and Sungai Lebir. During the study, they were then residing on the edges of the road leading up to the National Park, approximately one (1) kilometer from the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) office of Kuala Koh. Their settlement area can be reached by road via Ciku to Kuala Koh National Park (approximately 46 km). Before FELDA Aring was opened the only way to reach their settlement was by river via Sungai Lebir from Laloh, Kuala Krai (see Figure 2).

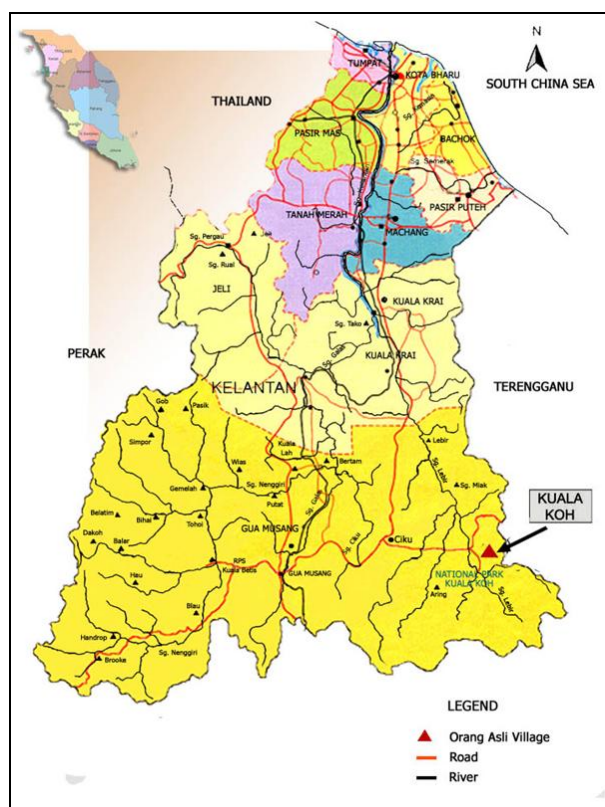


Fig. 2: Location of Orang Asli village at Kuala Koh, Kelantan, Malaysia.

During the study, the total number of residents was 150 people consisting of 34 families. They lived in three (3) groups, namely; (i) group residing near the DWNP office and National Park (19 families), (ii) group residing in Ulu Pertam (7 families), (iii) group residing around Sungai Sat, Pahang (8 families). The study was performed using qualitative methods, whereas data was collected via techniques of observation, interview sessions ranging from individual interviews and focus group discussions, as well as the analysis of documents; including documents related to the lifestyle, beliefs and medicinal practices of Orang Asli particularly the Batek tribe. Administrative records and implementations of modern medicine for them were also examined. The rationale behind each of the data collection techniques in the context of study implementation are as follows:

i. Observation:

This technique was used in observing the lifestyle of residents, especially in relation to the natural environment and sustenance towards the environment. For this purpose, more than five (5) visits were made to the settlement of the Batek tribe in Kuala Koh. For comparison studies, observations were also carried out towards a number of Batek tribesmen living together with the Semaq Beri tribe in Kampung Sungai Berua, Terengganu. A total of three (3) visits were made by the researcher to this village.

ii. Interview:

Interview sessions were carried out in order to obtain clarification regarding the various issues as highlighted in the research objective. A total of four informants from among the Batek tribe in Kuala Koh were interviewed for this purpose. They were Penghulu Hamdan bin Keladi (Village Headman), Keladi bin Hon, Kulim bin Tebu and Ahmad bin Pin. Interviews were also conducted on Ibrahim, Alias and Samad in the Sungai Berua village. While for obtaining information relating to the implementation of modern medicine, interviews were carried out on the personnel of FELDA Aring Rural Health Centre, Gua Musang as well as JAKOA staff members.

iii. Document Analysis:

Various earlier researches, records from relevant departments and other reading materials were utilised as secondary data. In obtaining such materials, visits were made to the offices of JAKOA Kota Bharu, JAKOA Gua Musang, JAKOA Kuala Terengganu and FELDA Aring Rural Health Centre. The data collected were based on two (2) sources of information, namely the primary and secondary sources, involving the data collection techniques of observations, interviews and document analysis.

The data collected from the various techniques are analyzed to provide a picture or meaning pattern of the issues studied. The analysis process is based on procedure; (i) review and refine data, (ii) organise data according to the themes determined, and (iii) data coding. For a clearer view the chronology of the data analysis process is shown in the following diagram in Figure 3.

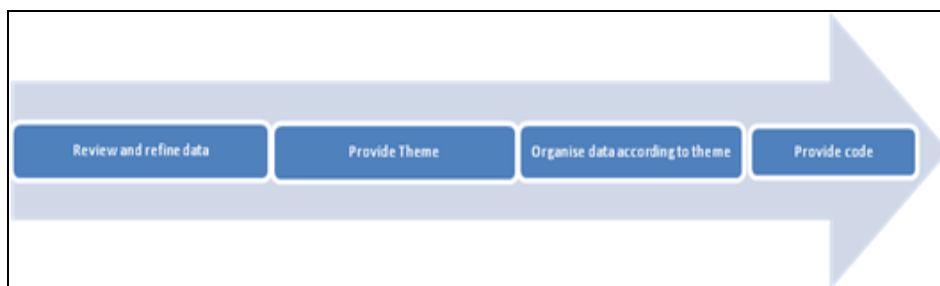


Fig. 3: Data analysis process.

Findings:

Early anthropological figures such as Frazer [7] and Evan-Pritchard [6] explains that primitive communities believe in the existence of supernatural powers dominating human life and all that exists on Earth. Based on the same understanding it is believed human life having close relations with nature and the surrounding environment. The supernatural powers will also punish humans who carry out wrong-doings by sending down disasters and diseases [24,5]. Thus, human will constantly make contact with the supernatural powers through rituals, in seeking wellbeing and protection. Such belief patterns are also practiced among the Batek tribes within the study area. Community members believe in supernatural powers dominating human life and the environment. Such supernatural powers are known as *Hala' Asal*, *Karei*, *Goba* and *Ya* [5].

The supernatural powers are believed to have roles of vital importance [22]. Among others, creation of the world and all contained therein, caretaker of human welfare including designating the settlement areas of certain groups of people, creating rules for humans, punishing the human wrong-doers, guardians of the Earth's circulation and the existence of natural phenomena such as rain, drought, flood, earthquake, lunar eclipse, rainbows and so forth.

Apart from the supernatural powers they also believe in the creation of superhuman beings known as *hala'* (shaman). These superhuman beings are believed to possess special characteristics such as capable of going into a trance, have psychic abilities and can transform into various shapes and forms. Its main role is as a medium between humans and the supernatural powers and cure diseases. For example, the *hala'* will make contact with the supernatural powers in conveying the desires of men that they may be spared from the outbreak of diseases, natural disasters and other ill-natured incidents.

In the context of human relationships with nature it is believed that the supernatural powers determine certain orders. These regulations are taboos in the relationships of humans with various other elements which range from; (i) relationship with the supreme powers, (ii) inter-human relationships, (iii) relationships with other beings (animals, plants and spirits), and (iv) human relationship with nature.

The belief in supernatural powers and taboos are the fundamentals that largely influence the socio-culture of local residents. In other words, it is the mores that shapes the folkways of each community member. Based upon the belief that the world and human life is under the dominance of the supernatural powers, it has managed to influence the thought patterns, daily behaviour and actions in all aspects, also including views on the causes of diseases as well as how to treat it.

In regards to the causes of disease, the study found that the Batek tribe believe in the supernatural powers as a determining factor towards the wellbeing and health status of humans. An individual may be suffering an ailment or otherwise by the virtue of the supernatural powers. However, the factors leading up to the individual getting sick varies. Analysis on the data obtained via fieldwork shows that there are two factor categories that cause individuals to be infected by disease, i.e. spiritual and physical factors. Under the spiritual factor the Batek tribe believe individuals suffering from diseases are the results of the following factors:

i. Torment of Spirits:

The Batek tribe believes in the existence of spirits which are part of Earth's inhabitants and can be found surrounding the settlements of the Batek. It is diverse, ranging from ghosts (*sorok*) of deceased humans, tree spirits, animal spirits, mountain spirits as well as river spirits. Humans that have been tormented by these spirits will suffer physical weakness, fever and act subconsciously.

ii. Violation of Taboo:

Regulations in the context of relationships with various elements must be complied to by humans. Violation of these regulations means violation of taboos, and will lead to the wrath of the supernatural powers which results in severe punishment. This will cause an individual to fall sick either by fever, physical weakness and disruption in the body's system.

iii. Faint-hearted:

The spirit is believed to be one of the main components that serve to make a human appear normal or otherwise. Situations whereas an individual is faint-hearted will only encourage the domination of malevolent spirits upon him. This is the element that makes him appear weak, depressed and experience problems with the body's system.

On the other hand, in the context of physical categories the Batek tribe believe that human will suffer from diseases due to two factors; changes in the Earth's vapour (*wap tet*) and human negligence in daily activities. The *wap tet* changes occur due to climatic changes such as rainfall after extreme heat and the circulation of night and day. The body's system is sometimes unable to adapt to the rapid *wap tet* changes until disruption to the system occurs. This causes human to suffer from fever or pain, especially headaches (*inge kuet*). This situation is also often regarded as a form of punishment from the supernatural powers caused by individuals who have violated certain taboos. While human negligence in carrying out daily activities ranges from negligence in using weaponry tools such as poison (used for blowdarts) unintentionally spilt on the blowpipe and other negligence when collecting forest products. These negligences can cause human illness or injury. However, these situations are often regarded as a form of punishment from the supernatural powers due to taboo violation actions committed by human.

The thought patterns of the Batek tribe on causes of disease as described previously furthermore becomes the fundamentals for them in determining the methods in healing illnesses suffered by community members. In general they cure diseases by seeking help from the supernatural powers via the following methods:

a. Seek Directly to the Supernatural Powers:

Through this method the supernatural powers are contacted directly in curing diseases suffered by patients, especially illnesses believed to be caused by spiritual elements. The communication medium commonly used are by holding a ritual and reciting incantations. Rituals are held in the form of chanting. Through these methods the supernatural powers are appealed to cure the illness suffered by the patient. Sometimes rituals are also performed in the form of blood sacrifice. This method is usually performed to prevent the individual that has violated taboos from further torment by the supernatural powers. The *hala'* will scar the body of the guilty individual to gain blood which will be mixed to a bowl of water and presented to the supernatural powers.

The application of these methods will involve the roles of *hala'* as the medium between patient and the supernatural powers. The *hala'* is believed to possess supernatural abilities such as skilled in reciting incantations and his desires have better chances of being granted by the supernatural powers. During the study there were at least three *hala'* playing active roles among the Batek tribes in Kuala Koh.

b. Use of Materials Provided by the Supernatural Powers:

The batek tribe believe that the natural surroundings around their lives are partially conferred by the supernatural powers in curing diseases. These sources are commonly used to cure illnesses caused by physical factors as well as a complement to the implementation of medicinal methods for illnesses caused by spiritual elements. There are two (2) categories of elements used; (a) plants, and (b) animals and insects.

As the practices of the Jakun tribe in Endau-Rompin [17], the application of plants as remedies in curing ailments is widespread. Survey respondents informed that over 200 types of forest plants can be used as remedies for various kinds of diseases. A similar situation occurs for the use of animals and insects. It is said that at least 20 kinds of animals and insects are often used for healing purposes.

The use of plants, animals and insects for medicinal purposes can be carried out individually by patients or with the guidance of the *hala'*. Each individual possesses the basic knowledge in identifying the ingredients used to make these remedies. Community members are exposed or introduced to such elements since at a very young age. Exposures are often carried out indirectly by older generations with the involvement of the younger generation in collecting the ingredients to make remedies.

However, the skills and wisdom of the *hala'* in selecting the right ingredients concerned often benefits the community members in assisting them in their endeavours. The structure of medicinal methods practiced can be shown in brief through the following diagram in Figure 4.

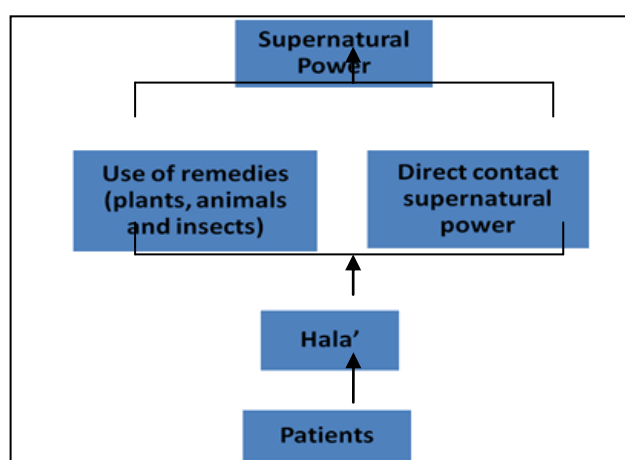


Fig. 4: Structure of medicinal method practiced among the Batek tribe.

Conclusion:

Previous discussions show that the belief systems dominate the views of the Batek tribe in regards to causes of illnesses. As explained, they basically believe in supernatural powers dominating the world and determine human life, including deciding upon the illness and health of someone. The supernatural powers are transliterated either through spiritual or physical factors.

Based on such views comes the existence of the faith-healing institution within the local social system which functions in providing medicinal services to community members. Through this medicinal system the *hala'* is the individual with the essential role in healing an illness suffered by community members. The role of *hala'* is aiding patients in seeking assistance from the supernatural powers, either by appealing directly or by using the elements provided by the supernatural powers such as plants, animals and insects.

This medicinal system is more trustworthy and reliable according to members of the community as it is part of the faith element practiced, and the younger generation is constantly exposed to its advantages from time to time in ensuring continuous practice. Thus, the Batek tribe does not simply accept and adapt to modern medicine even though they have been exposed to it through contacts made with outside communities.

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