Traditional Malay medicine as a contested modality of knowledge

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What is meant by ethno-medicine?

• An indigenous and/or cultural system of healing and medicine, commonly referred to today as ‘traditional healing and medicine’

• Encompasses diverse approaches and practices to health, healing and pharmacology which can be very specific to a particular locale

• Conceptualisations of the human body and health are very much informed by the cultural world view and physical environment of the ethnic community
Traditional healing is

‘a diversity of practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal and mineral-based medicines which also includes spiritual therapies, techniques and exercises...to maintain health [and] to treat or prevent illness.’ (2001)
Malay conceptualisations of ‘nature’
- Consisting of visible and non-visible environments
  - physical places inhabited by humans and animals
  - alam maya inhabited by ancestral spirits, genies and hantu

- Forests as sources of:
  - sustenance;
  - cures/poisons;
  - a healing sanctuary; and
  - a ‘spirit’ eco-system

Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.
Malay conceptualisations of the body

- Made up of 4 elements:
  - earth (flesh);
  - fire (blood);
  - water (phlegm); and
  - wind (temperament)

- Brain function related to 4 ‘humours’:
  blood, phlegm, yellow & black bile

Courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre, National Heritage Board.
- ‘Soul substance’ (semangat) determines one’s susceptibility to illness

- Manipulation of vital energy through the nervous system

- Hot/cold, moist/dry dichotomies (and continuums) e.g. Food which can affect the body’s humoural balance is categorised into ‘hot’, ‘cold’ and ‘neutral’ groups

- The mitigating force of ‘bisa’
Malay conceptualisations of malady
- ‘natural means’ (sakit biasa)
  - ‘extraordinary means’ (sakit luar biasa) likely to be caused by maleficent spirit agents (hantu) and/or witchcraft (sihir)
- Not observing customs (adat) or taboos (pantang larang)
- Various ‘passions’ (angin) and psychological trauma (badi)
Vital energy, mind and spirit are central concepts to health.

- Optimum health is achieved when all 4 elements as well as ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ are balanced and leaning ‘slightly cool’

- The healing or nourishment of the entire body through audio patterns, ritualistic movements and/or diet

- Composite of animist, Hindu, Islamic (Sufi) traditions
The role of the *bomoh-pawang*

- **Role in traditional Malay society**
  - Indispensable yet ambivalent figure in traditional Malay society (e.g. royal bomoh)
  - Deals with ‘everyday immediate problems’, physical ailments, sometimes spells and charms

- **Dukun** (Javanese reference), *bomoh* (specialist in folk medicine), *pawang* (general practitioner of magic)

- **Healing philosophy**
  - ‘Merely’ a teacher and/or an instrument/ conduit through which more ancient beings channel their power

*Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*
**Acquiring Ilmu**

- **Ilmu** (knowledge)
  - Combination of an ability to manipulate supernatural forces and/or vital energy, sound knowledge of herbs and poisons, humoral pathology, bloodletting, bone-setting, and simple hygiene

- **Ilmu turun** = esoteric knowledge inherited from the past/line of healers (*baka*) and/or via ‘extraordinary’ means
  - *akuan* – e.g. a supernatural encounter or spirit familiar
  - *alamat* – e.g. a dream or signs

- **Ilmu tuntut** = knowledge gained through books and apprenticeship
Usually falls into four broad categories:

i. Minor rituals e.g. divination to determine the cause of the affliction

ii. Drugs, mostly derived from plants and herbs prescribed to heal the patient

Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.
iii. Elaborate rituals e.g. séances, exorcisms or cathartic performances to excise a supernatural cause of the affliction

iii. Physiological therapies, e.g. cupping, bone-setting and assisting in childbirth

Traditional Malay Healers

- Skilled practitioners with specialized knowledge
  - women’s health (fecundity, midwifery and contraception, beauty)
  - men’s health (virility, physical strength, hygiene)
  - Bone-setting, blood-letting and other physical therapies
  - Overlapping expertise

- Jamu and majun

Courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.
Female traditional healer specialising in the knowledge and skills relating to pre-post-partum practices

Includes pregnancy, delivery, infant and child care, nursing and weaning, family planning, abortion and matters relating to the menstrual cycle

Usually a dukun or bomoh too with the ability to treat general physical ailments and with ilmu to protect herself and others from supernatural forces in man and nature.

A case study: Mak bidan

- Ilmu is transmitted (inherited) matrinely
- Must demonstrate a level of religiosity, benevolence, bravery and ‘tolerance of “dirt” (kotoran)’
- Preferably married and having borne children herself
- Ambivalence towards her powers
- Open to allegations of witchcraft

- In collaboration-competition relationship with maternity nurses

Tools of the trade

- Totems and other instruments
  - *Azimat* (talismans)
  - *Pengeras* (usually a blade or any sharp metal object)
  - *Jampi mentera* and/or *Quranic doa*
  - *Air jampi* (‘sanctified water’)
  - Specific plants – e.g. sireh (betel leaves)

- ‘Setting the stage’ and/or creating a ‘sanctified space’

Images courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre, Asian Civilisations Museum and National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board, respectively.
Healing Performances

- Main peteri, mak yong
- Puja pantai, mandi Safar

Source: PUSAKA/RADHIKAL FILMS 2011
Healing Performances

- Music and dance to evoke psycho-somatic catharsis and encourage re-integration into the larger community

Images courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board
Impact of Islam on TMM

- Islam had a profound impact on Malay ethno-medical practices
  - ‘Medicinal knowledge’ as contained in the Qur’an
  - ‘Prophetic medicine’ or remedies as practised by the Prophet Muhammad and reported in hadith sahih
  - Yunani (Greco-Arab-Persian) ethno-medical tradition (Ibn Sina/ Avicenna)

Images courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.
Impact of Islam on TMM

- *Kitab-kitab Tib* = medicinal manuscripts
  - Herbal preparations for various physical ailments
  - Divination guides and written symbols (*wafak*)
  - Spells, incantations (*jampi mentera*), prayers (*doa*)

Images courtesy of Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia.
A total belief system of dialectical interactions

Diagram source: Mohd Taib bin Osman, ‘Patterns of supernatural premises underlying the institution of the bomoh in Malay culture’, 1972 (KITLV)
The privileging of Qur’anic and hadith cures over folk medicine – co-existence between imam and bomoh

Increased ambivalence to and even rejection of the bomoh-pawang
• Colonial explorations of the flora, fauna and peoples of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago
• Interest in SEA ecology for both commercial and scientific pursuits
• Establishment of various botanical gardens in the Dutch and British colonies
Tracking Nature

- Identifying and cataloguing, scientific testing and verification of the efficacy of plants used in traditional remedies
- Botanists, naturalists and colonial officers often aided by local Malays and/or Orang Asli

Images courtesy of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, National Parks Board
Introduction of social sciences and the scientific study of societies and cultures
- a hierarchy of ‘races’ and civilisations

Introduction of scientific/allopathic medicine, the clinic-hospital institution & subsequent local responses
- Fundamental difference between treating ‘disease’ and ‘illness’
- Dismissive attitude of Western doctors to the affective (and communal) aspects of healing

Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.
Colonial accounts exoticising and undermining folk medicine in favor of Western medical treatment

- W. E. Maxwell, 1881: ‘the black art’, ‘demon worship’
- W. W. Skeat, 1898: ‘superstitions of the lower races’
Future and Fate of TMM

- Ambiguity and uncertainty as to the fate of traditional Malay medicine and healing approaches
- **Bad news:**
  - Dwindling number of traditional Malay healers
  - No longer a viable source of income or social status
  - Censure by Islamic orthodoxy and ‘competition’ from scientific-based medicine
  - Decreased effectiveness vis-à-vis western scientific medicine and/or other ethnomedical traditions (TCM and Ayurvedic)
Future and Fate of TMM

- **Good news:**
  - More research into ethno-botany and various traditional approaches to healing
  - ‘Laboratorisation’ and mechanisation of traditional medicine
  - Affordability; increasing awareness and appeal of *jamu*, Yunani medicine and *urut* beyond the Malay/Muslim community as an alternative and/or complement to conventional allopathic medicine/cosmopolitan practices
  - Maintaining traditional medical practices as a marker of ethnic identity
For better or worse...

- A preference for traditional healers and approaches to manage psychological and chronic physical ailments
- A last-resort measure after the failure of conventional western medicine and therapies
- The Islamisation of certain Malay healing rituals/practices as a means of reinterpretation, adaptation and/or transformation
- The ‘professionalisation’ of certain types and/or functions of traditional Malay medicine practitioners
Selected bibliography

- Mohd Taib bin Osman, ‘Patterns of supernatural premises underlying the institution of the bomoh in Malay culture’, 1972 (KITLV).
- Roziah Sidek @Mat Sidek and Prof Datin Dr Azizan Baharuddin, ‘Traditional Healing in Malay Culture: The Case of a Malay Manuscript of the 19th century’, 2010 (abstract from a PhD thesis by Roziah Sidek on MSS1292 Kitab Tib).
Terima kasih

Source: Tropenmuseum Collection, The Netherlands