



Traditional Medicine in West Sumatra: Some General Features

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ABSTRACT The Minangkabau is one of the largest matrilineal societies in the world. In this study, the different healing traditions prevalent in Minangkabau are described briefly. By looking at the different healing methods, the researcher offers another perspective on this society. Many publications regarding the Minangkabau focused mainly on matters regarding the social structure. The primary objective of this study is to explore and illustrate the traditional Minangkabau healing methods in all its facets. The research method consisted of fieldwork which included observation and open-ended interviews with traditional healers. It was discovered that there are three main types of traditional healers: One who focuses on Islamic healing methods, one who considers various forms of healing and one who acts as a medium. After analysing all these healing methods, gender-specific components and three-fold healing elements were identified.

INTRODUCTION¹

The Minangkabau people live in West Sumatra, forming one of the largest matrilineal societies in the world. Various researchers were fascinated by the fact that matrilineal and Islamic elements co-exist. As a consequence, there have been numerous publications about the Minangkabau society. In this study, the researcher looks into this society from another point of view, that is, from a description of the traditional healing methods. Such an exploration can contribute to a better understanding of this specific culture in West Sumatra. Furthermore, it is intended to stress the importance of ethnomedical knowledge. Some medical disorders do not fit into the Western biomedical concept, and so it is difficult for a doctor at a regional health center to treat those medical disorders. This paper can help to fill in the gap for medical practitioners to understand the local peculiar belief system.

Objectives

(1) In the field of Minangkabau studies, there are only a few books and articles that focused on the topic of traditional Minangkabau medicine. Therefore, one objective of this research is to explore and illustrate the traditional healing methods in West Sumatra.

(2) The researcher intends to offer a 'new' perspective in the domain of Minangkabau stud-

ies. The ethnomedical data could shed new light on the way of life in the village communities of West Sumatra. It is very well possible that the healers and their healing methods revealed other views regarding the Minangkabau society that are different from those which were described by many other researchers.

(3) Another objective of this research is to illustrate the healing methods and to introduce some healing plants that are widespread in the interior of West Sumatra. Such a brief overview might give an impression about the traditional knowledge and background of the so-called folk taxonomies that help to categorize plants (D'Andrade 2003).

Literature

The literature about the traditional Minangkabau healing methods is not very exhaustive. In the colonial times, researchers like Kleiweg de Zwaan (1912) or Kreemer (1908) focused their research interest on the healing methods which were used by the *dukun*. The term '*dukun*' refers to the traditional healer. For the sake of further elaborations, there is need to define the term 'traditional medicine': "Traditional medicine comprises knowledge systems that developed over generations within various societies before the era of modern medicine" (Ahmad et. al. 2015: 4).

In the post-colonial era, some researchers like Mitchell (1969) and Marzali (2003) began to relate medical disorders with a unique social

structure. Marzali introduced the term *Kompleks Minangkabau* (Minangkabau complex) which stressed that the Minangkabau men are in a 'tense' situation due to their position in a matrilineal society. Therefore, they are faced with stress and as a consequence they become sick.

Lajtai is one of the few authors who accentuated the fact that the healing methods of the Minangkabau *dukun* (Lajtai 2003) is worth describing. However, his explanations are quite brief. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that he emphasized the importance of the traditional Minangkabau medicine.

The 'newer' literature focuses on more specific issues. Some authors refer to it as the so-called Culture-Bound Syndromes (CBS). These are disorders that originate in one region and have their particular features. In Southeast Asia, the most famous CBS is probably *amok*. In West Sumatra, there are also CBS like *sijundai* which is a kind of witchcraft and might affect some people. Authors like Almos and Pramono (2015) gave brief descriptions of such medical disorders in West Sumatra. Other writers like Stark and Yahaya (2015) described the medical disorder of *rongeh* which refers to a tree that can be found in the jungle of West Sumatra, and if someone comes in contact with its gum, then he or she might be infected with a skin disease called *rongeh*.

The climate and the geographical conditions must be considered, looking at the medical disorders. Authors who considered that were Yunarti et al. (2014). They focused their research on the West Sumatran districts of Agam and Tanah Datar.

Khairiah et al. (2017) provided a brief overview of medicinal plants that can be found in one Minangkabau village community. However, their article focused only on the botanical point of view.

Not only did scientists write about the traditional Minangkabau medicine, some local healers also did. One of these healers is Sabirin (2014). He is a healer who originates from West Sumatra and published the method of traditional healing while focusing more on Islamic healing methods. In general, Islamic healing methods often contain healing elements that were mentioned in the Qur'an and the narrations of Prophet Muhammad.

From the literature review, it is evident that many researchers stress that the social struc-

ture is the cause for specific medical disorders. Particularly Lajtai (2003) describes the role of traditional healers in a brief way. Yunarti et al. (2014) offer an emic and etic view of the concept of medical disorders. However, in this paper about traditional healing in West Sumatra, the author intends to categorize the types of healers and illustrate their traditional healing methods in more detail.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design which consisted of observation and in-depth interviews. The 'ideal' would be participant observation, but that would mean being active as a healer. In this research, it was not possible. The interviews were mainly unstructured because the healers decided what they wanted to teach. When the researcher reached a certain level, some healers would inform him of a particular kind of knowledge. The researcher had no idea that such an element exists. So gradually the knowledge about traditional healing methods increased.

The researcher conducted the research in one village community in the interior of West Sumatra. Traditionally, the highlands were considered to be the origin of the Minangkabau culture (Diradjo 2017). The researcher focused on the healers in one village community plus their network. Sometimes, the patients had to consult healers from other villages because specialists in some areas could not be found in the main village of this research setting.

The healers were observed when they treated a patient. After that, the researcher interviewed the healers in order to get a better understanding of the traditional medicine.

The research took place between 2011 until 2017. The research process was circular and the researcher did some fieldwork during the semester break. At the end, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed. The knowledge gap between the healers and the researcher gradually became smaller.

OBSERVATIONS

Ethnographic Data

Here the traditional medicine in West Sumatra will be described from different angles. First, it is

focused on the healers, and afterward, it focused on the etiology and healing methods.

The Healers

The first visible feature for a researcher is the fact that different types of healers can be found on the highlands of West Sumatra. The different types of healers are as follow:

(a) Islamic healers, (b) Traditional healers (*dukun*), and (c) Mediums (*orang keturunan*).

The Islamic healers refer to Islam. Two types can be subsumed as Islamic healers, namely the orthodox Islamic healer who refers only to the Qur'an and Sunnah as well as the Sufi healer who incorporates some esoteric knowledge.

The *dukun* is a term that denotes the traditional healer who uses both Islamic and pre-Islamic concepts. Here, healers who are consulted for all types of medical disorders and healers who can be considered as specialists should be differentiated. They are specialists with regard to the usage of special techniques, like the massage techniques or they can be categorized as specialists in the treatment of one particular kind of disease.

The third type of healers is the so-called *orang keturunan*. In the village where this research was conducted, this type of healers consists mainly of women. The *orang keturunan* can be regarded as a medium which use the healing method that was shown by the spirits or other invisible elements.

All the three types of healers mentioned have their own unique method of treatment. However, there are general features that can be found in all of these healers. In this paper, these general features will be shown.

Etiology

If a patient comes to a traditional healer, then he or she has to make a proper diagnosis. Sometimes this is easy whenever the healer is confronted with clear symptoms like a bloody scratch. But some medical disorders are different, which makes it difficult to get a 'fast' diagnosis. In such a case, there are different approaches.

a) Some healers like the *dukun* or Islamic healers have a specific 'feeling' that enables them to detect the illness or disease.² Sometimes, a

certain *Surah* of the Qur'an can help to find the origin of the problem. For example, if the healer recites the *Surah al Fatiha* which is the first *Surah* of the Qur'an, then he or she knows that each word of it is related to a particular part of the body. The healer might recite it and move his or her hand above the body of the patient. Suddenly, a strange feeling can arise which indicates that a certain part of the body is affected.

b) Another well-known method to detect the origin of a specific disorder is to use divination. This is usually done by the *dukun*. In this context, it means that the healer recites a certain spell and then he or she can see particular patterns which reveal the origin of the medical problem. The most wide-spread divinatory method is to use the egg of a village hen. After the recitation of specific spells, the *dukun* is able to see patterns which represent a typical 'origin' of the medical disorder. The healer can see such patterns on the eggshell. If he or she wants to know more about it, then he or she must break the egg so that the patterns can be seen on the egg yolk.

The healers have six different patterns at their disposal. The pattern in Figure 2 is an example. It is a kind of sign. In this example, it shows that the treatment will be very difficult or it might even be impossible.

c) A special type of healers is the *orang keturunan*. This healer is a person who acts as a medium. In the village community where this research was conducted, the *orang keturunan* were two ladies. These mediums lie on a mattress and are covered by a white blanket (Fig. 1). On Thursday night, the people consult this type of healer. All through that night, they sit around the medium. Suddenly, the healer utters some words in an altered state of consciousness. Dur-



Fig. 1. The *orang keturunan* is covered by a blanket

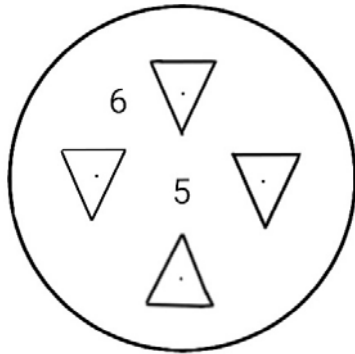


Fig. 2. A pattern that can be seen on the egg yolk and egg white

ing this session, the healer informs the patients about the plants that must be collected. Some patients are coming for the second time and so they come along with the healing plants. The medium in an altered state of consciousness informs the patient on what to do, how to use the plants and continue with the treatment.

Culture-Bound Syndromes (CBS)

The healers themselves differentiate between 'natural' and 'supernatural' medical disorders. This differentiation also decides what kind of treatment must be followed. In general, it can be said that 'supernatural' medical disorders involve a kind of spirit (*jinn*). Some of these illnesses are quite 'special' and often related to the Minangkabau society. Therefore, they can be categorized as Culture-Bound Syndromes (CBS). For example, there is a kind of witchcraft that is called *sijundai*. There are even songs and stories that describe *sijundai*. A lover of a certain lady might be rejected. As a consequence, he is very disappointed and decides to take revenge. One option that comes to his mind is to use the black magic of *sijundai*. Thus, he goes to a villager who is knowledgeable in that black art. The victim (who is usually a female person) suffers from emotional outbursts: She might cry suddenly or shout without reason. Finally, the family decides to consult a healer in order to get proper treatment.

Treatment

In the village community and its network of healers is a number of traditional healers and

two *orang keturunan*. Regarding the Islamic healers, there is one orthodox healer, one representative of the *Naqshbandiyyah* and some adherents of the *Jamaat Tabligh* who are part-time medical practitioners. The *Naqshbandiyyah* is an Islamic brotherhood that is widespread in Indonesia. With regard to the healing knowledge, it contains a lot of esoteric knowledge that the *shaikh* reveals to his students. The *Jamaat Tabligh* is a missionary group that sends its members to different mosques for a certain period (usually three days). During that time the followers encourage the locals to be more active in deeds of worship. Not every group includes healers, but the local adherent was active as a healer in the field of cupping.

Although there are healers from different healing traditions, general patterns in the treatment can be observed. In general, there are three healing components:

a.) The Usage of Plants

Particular plants can be used for the treatment of certain medical disorders. An excellent example is the plant of *si dingin* (Bot. Bryophyllum Calycinum). It is assumed that this plant has a cooling effect. Actually, *dingin* means 'cold'. The people use a leaf and put it on the forehead of the feverish person. Amongst the *dukun*, there are healers who can be considered as specialists for plants.

Very famous are the four healing plants that are combined: *si dingin* (Bot. Bryophyllum Calycinum), *si tawa* (Bot. Costus Speciosus), *sikaraw* (Bot. Enydra Fluctuans), and *sikumpai* (Bot. Panicum auritum). These 'four healers' are called *tawa nan ampek* (Stark et al. 2016; Tas'ady et al. 2013). It is remarkable that all types of healers stress the effectiveness of these plants. Usually, the healers cut the four plants into small pieces, and after that, the plants are put in water. Then, the healers use a branch of the *saliguri* tree and dip it in the water. Finally, the water is sprinkled at the back of the patient. Often, it is used in the treatment of a kind of fever, called *keteguran* and measles.

Regarding the four healing plants it must be accentuated that they have the prefix 'si'. In the Minangkabau language, the prefix *si* is often

Table 1: Healing plants that are widespread

<i>Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Usage (in the village medicine)</i>
Bawang Merah (Bot. <i>Allium cepa</i>)	The people buy it from one of the stores in the village	The patients drink its water against stomach ache.
Bunga Kumis Kucing (Bot. <i>Orthosiphon aristatus</i>)	Within the village	The whole trunk will be cooked in water, and then the patient drinks it. It should help to treat rheumatic complaints.
Bunga Melati (Bot. <i>Jasminum</i>)	Within the village	This plant is put in water and then, the patient drinks it. It is used for the treatment of gastric, low blood pressure and faints.
Daun (leaves of) Kacang Kayu (Bot. <i>Cajanus cajan</i>)	Within the village	The leaves will be boiled in water and then put on itchy skin. Some healers use the leaves to reduce fever by putting them on the forehead.
Daun (leaves of) Pandan (Bot. <i>Pandanus</i>)	Within the village	The leaves are used for the treatment of hemorrhoids. The leaves will be cut into small pieces and then squeezed and mixed with some water. This water will be put on the affected place.
Mahoni (Bot. <i>Swietenia macrophylla</i>)	Within the village	The patient eats the seeds as treatment for Malaria.

used to address persons. There might be a conversation like the following: *Who is this? Oh, this is si Ahmad*. The prefix *si* gives a personal connotation. The four healing plants appear as something more personal. Other widespread healing plants are mentioned in Table 1.

b.) *The Usage of Invocations*

The healers have the opportunity of using specific invocations for healing purposes. Some of these invocations originate from the Qur'an and others have no explicit religious background. Furthermore, religious terms and names are used to create a kind of religious atmosphere.

c.) *The Strengthening of Self-healing Forces of the Body*

Some *dukun* call it *sir*. Based on their understanding, there is a white corn-like spot within the body that has the power to activate the self-healing element. For other healers, there is a vital force (*semangat*) that can either be strong or weak. The healers try to strengthen it. For example, the healers might recite Qur'anic verses on water which the patients drink. As a consequence the self-healing element of the body should be supported.

Not all healers use all three healing elements. Some might use only one or two. During the research, it became striking that most of the female healers often use no invocations during their treatment methods, but all of them use plants. On the other hand, some male healers use no plants in their healing methods. They rely on the effectiveness of invocations. This fact is remarkable as there seems to be a more gender specific-element in the traditional Minangkabau medicine.

In order to understand the usage of the three elements, we look at the treatment of the mentioned witchcraft of *sijundai*. An illness that appears as a result of witchcraft is considered to be a 'hot' medical disorder. The healer must use a medication that cools down the body of the victim. Usually, lemons are considered to have a cooling effect. The healer orders the victim to take a bath in water in which *limau purut* (Bot. Citrus Hystrix DC) are squeezed. However, the mere usage of plants is considered to be insufficient. Therefore the healers often use a long invocation which is part of their esoteric knowledge.

The treatment can consist of different levels. It was discovered that medical disorders that are difficult to treat are of several levels. In general, these are disorders that are related to *jinn*

or other spirits. Such disorders are considered to be severe. Hence, the healers use a combination of plants and invocations.

DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter, a binary opposition namely the opposition 'male' versus 'female' healers have been mentioned. This pair of opposition is related to the usage of invocations which were memorized (the element of culture) and plants (the element of nature). However, there is another major dichotomy, namely the opposition pair 'inside' versus 'outside'. This dichotomy is related to the gender as well. Some healing plants are domesticated on the matrilineal clan land. Appropriately many medicinal plants are more related to the female element. The men often rely on invocations that must be memorized but sometimes they also look for plants in the forest.

So far, other researchers did not look into gender-specific peculiarities, but they also discovered that binary oppositions play an essential role. Yunarti et al. (2014) emphasized that the origin of medical disorders can be either physical or non-physical (supernatural). In general, supernatural disorders are not considered by Western biomedicine. However, the locals have their own worldview. Successful treatment has to consider this perspective.

For a traditional society a refined way of life is important but nonetheless there are matters that can threaten the harmonious way of living in the village community. Witchcraft is such an element that threatens the harmony. Therefore, the healers play a crucial role to re-establish the usual situation. Often the healers live in places that are at the margin of the village. Such a marginal location is useful as it helps the healers to have contact with 'unseen spirits'. Moreover, the healers are more 'free' to behave in a way that is not refined in a strict sense. The healers can easily use the plants that are domesticated within the village and the plants that are in the forest or gardens.

The healers have esoteric knowledge which they obtain after studying with various other experts. Some plants are well-known amongst the people particularly the plants that are used for treating Culture-Bound Syndromes (CBS).

Nevertheless the invocations are part of the esoteric knowledge. Even for the researcher it was difficult to study these supplications. In general, the healer has some authority as he or she knows the name of the *jinn* that is responsible for the medical disorder.

CONCLUSION

The Minangkabau traditional medicine and healing methods has some unique features, for example, the usage of spells in Minangkabau language. However, the traditional healing system in West Sumatra is not isolated. It is part of the greater region of Southeast Asia. In the whole region, there are mediums that are part of the traditional medicine. Besides, West Sumatra is also part of the Islamic world. Healing methods and concepts from other areas can also be found in the highlands of West Sumatra. A good example is the humoral system that is also widespread in other places. However, the humoral system is not that distinctive like the medical system in other regions. This can be clearly seen by the fact that most of the healing plants are not categorized in a humoral way, but there are other unique taxonomies like the mentioned system of the prefix *si* amongst some plants. Nevertheless, the humoral system is not very detailed in West Sumatra. There is just a simple dichotomy, that is, cold versus hot.

The traditional healing system in West Sumatra is still popular. One reason is that the fee of traditional healers is quite low and another reason is that the healers understand the worldview of the people. Unseen spirits like *jinn* are important in the daily life of the people. For the locals, only the traditional healers can treat medical disorders that are connected with *jinn* or sorcery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For research that covers traditional medicine, it would be interesting whether other areas are similar or not. Further research in different places could reveal that. Particularly in areas out of Indonesia (like for example, in Negeri Sembilan/Malaysia) this could be fascinating as it would contribute to the well-known topic of adaptation and change of the Minangkabau culture.

LIMITATIONS

This research about traditional Minangkabau medicine was conducted in one village community in the interior of West Sumatra. It comprises the healers plus the network of healers who are consulted by the local population. This relatively small research setting is a limitation of this research. It would be interesting to know whether the results in other areas are similar. However, it can be assumed that the situation in other areas is quite analogous as each village community is seen to form an autonomous unit that follows the default matrilineal way of life.

NOTES

1. This study comprises a brief version of parts of the author's unpublished PhD Thesis with the title, *The Minangkabau Healers and Healing Methods: A Structural Analysis*. The thesis was submitted in 2018 at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The supervisor was Associate Professor Dr. Fatan Hamamah Yahaya.
2. The author uses the terms 'illness' and 'disease' in the sense of Arthur Kleinman who defines these terms as follows: "A key axiom in medical anthropology is the dichotomy between two aspects of sickness: Disease and illness. *Disease* refers to a malfunctioning of biological and/or psychological processes, while the term *illness* refers to the psychosocial experience and meaning of perceived disease." (Kleinman 1980: 72).

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