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THE MALAY SHAMAN AS ENTREPRENEUR:
ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract:

Non-Western business models have received a greater amount of attention in recent years. In this article, the researchers analyze the entrepreneurial concept of traditional Malay shamans. The researchers conducted qualitative research and focused on two shamans: one originates from a rural area and one resides in an urban environment. Furthermore, they lived in two geographical regions, namely Kelantan (Malaysia) and West Sumatra (Indonesia). The researchers closely studied the daily routines of the shamans and carried out unstructured interviews. It was detected that their entrepreneurial activities are embedded in a system of family relationships and that profit-making is of minor importance, particularly for the healer, who lives in a village with its own form of subsistence. Furthermore, the Malay shamans follow a flexible timetable and can be easily contacted by their patients and customers. They also use the terminology of the local worldview, which gives them the opportunity to become more popular.

Keywords:

Kelantan, Malay Shamans, Minangkabau, Traditional Entrepreneurship.

Introduction

In recent years, a number of researchers have emphasized the significance of incorporating ancient wisdom into a variety of sectors, including business enterprises. They stress that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of the neoliberal market economy (Pio & Waddock, 2020). Many small-scale enterprises became bankrupt and had to shut down.

Therefore, an orientation toward traditional values has the potential to assist and motivate economies. In the emerging field of indigenous entrepreneurship, there is a focus on the four R's (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004): relationship, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution. This concept can be juxtaposed with the dominant system of the two P's (power and profit). In this article, the researchers want to look at a concrete example, namely the Malay shaman. One of the features of an indigenous community is, in general, not to belong to the dominant population (Mika, 2020). However, in the case of the Malay shaman, it is different. Thus, it is more precise to categorize them as traditional healers whose healing approach incorporates indigenous characteristics as a result of their historical engagement with the native community. Such an entrepreneurial concept can be intriguing as it includes an understanding that is 'independent' of an academic approach.

In the Malay-speaking world, the Malay shaman is called *dukun* or *bomoh*. Usually, the term *bomoh* is used in Malaysia, while the term *dukun* is preferred in Indonesia. The system of these traditional healers belongs to an indigenous form of healing that existed in its major features already before the emergence of major religions like Islam or Hinduism (Winstedt, 2007). It can be considered to belong to the folk religion (Osman, 1989). The term shaman in this paper is used in a general sense and should comprise traditional healers within the sphere of Malay folk religion. It must be emphasized that the researchers use the term Malay in a wider sense, i.e., not only referring to the Malays of the Malay peninsula but also to the surrounding areas.¹

In the scientific community, there are different ways on how to define the term shaman. Ronald Hutton writes:

There seem to be four different definitions circulating at the present time. In one, shamanism is the practice of anybody who contacts a spirit world while in an altered state of consciousness. A second limits it to specialist practitioners who use such contacts at the behest of others. A third attempts to distinguish shamans from other such specialists, such as 'mediums', 'witch doctors', 'spiritual healers' or 'prophets', by some particular technique. This is the definition most commonly accepted among modern scholars, but there is no agreement upon what that technique should be. To some the definitive characteristic is that shamans exert control over the spirits with whom they work, while to others it is the ability to undertake a personal journey into an alternative reality and to accomplish tasks there. The fourth definition stands on its own, being the use of the expression 'shamanism' to characterize the native religions of Siberia and neighbouring parts of Asia (Hutton, 2007, pp. vii – viii).

In this research, the researchers followed the first definition and focused on two geographical regions, namely Kelantan and West Sumatra. Two shamans were observed, and their entrepreneurial activities will be the major interest in this article.

¹ The researchers use the term 'Malay' in a general way, like Ismet and Rebecca Fanany, who wrote about Malay proverbs but were focusing on the Minangkabau language (Fanany & Fanany, 2003).

Research Objectives

The research objectives of this research were the following:

- To get a new perspective on the Malay shamans by looking at their entrepreneurial activities.
- To describe the features of the business endeavors of the Malay shamans.
- To contrast the Malay shamans in an urban setting and a rural setting in relation to entrepreneurship.

Literature

The literature review will examine the existing literature on traditional Malay medicine and its potential for generating income. However, there will also be a brief look at the entrepreneurial concepts of non-Western economic systems.

Literature About The Malay Shaman

There is plenty of literature about the healing system of the traditional Malay shaman. From the beginning to the middle of the 20th century, the so-called Malay magic fascinated many researchers, for example, Skeat (1900) and Wilkinson (1906), who gave a detailed picture of the folk beliefs, or Endicott (1985), who analyzed this folk system by applying structuralist perspectives. The Malay shaman is the most important character in folk religion, inspiring numerous studies. Here, it is necessary to emphasize that there are different types of *bomoh* (Riji, 2005) or *dukun* (Stark, 2019). While some are devoted to medicinal plants, others engage in rituals. Other scholars directed their attention towards practitioners who specialized in fields such as midwifery (Laderman, 1987), martial arts (Werner, 1986), or performance seances (Laderman, 1993). However, the limits of many research projects were that the entrepreneurial component was often neglected.

In recent years, social scientists became aware that traditional medicine also contains business components (Jamal, 2006). Medical pluralism exists in society, allowing patients the freedom to select their preferred healer or doctor. The healers will charge for their services and medicine. In the Malay world, protective charms and amulets (*azimat*) are widespread (Sahad, 2015). Some healers also sell herbs and medicinal plants (Riji, 2005). These initiatives demonstrate the existence of a potential market for alternative medicine in the Malay-speaking world.

Literature About Traditional Non-Western Economic Concepts

The other major interest of this article is to look at the traditional way of entrepreneurial behavior. There was (and is still) a dominance of Western epistemological and economic ideas (Banerjee & Tedamson, 2010). Nonetheless, there has been an increased focus on indigenous forms of entrepreneurship in recent years (Dana, 2015). It is crucial to emphasize that there have been seminal works in the past, such as the renowned *Stone Age Economics* by Marshall Sahlins (2017). The classical work of Marcel Mauss (1966) served as an inspiration for many economic anthropologists. He described one important feature of many traditional ways of exchange, namely reciprocity. The receipt of a gift necessitates the occurrence of a reciprocal exchange.

The discipline of economic anthropology, as well as the subjects of business and entrepreneurial studies, have recognized the potential to acquire novel ideas and inspirations. The already mentioned 4 R's are a good way (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004), as they show that traditional societies put the interests of society as their major concern.

Waddock (2015, 2018) gave a very inspiring perspective. She proposed that leaders could learn from shamans. There are three characteristics of a shaman that could help leaders: A shaman is a healer, a connector, and a person who makes sense. Waddock thinks that these characteristics are indispensable in a corporate environment. The view of Waddock has the potential to stimulate other scholars, encouraging them to adopt a fresh and novel outlook.

Research Method

The research methodology will be explained in this chapter. Ethnography was used to gather data for this qualitative study.

Research Setting and Informants

The research was conducted in two different places: West Sumatra (Indonesia) and Kelantan (Malaysia). The study involved a comprehensive examination of the therapeutic and commercial practices of two healers. In Indonesia, the term that denotes a traditional healer is *dukun*. The *dukun* Nabil (pseudonym) from West Sumatra was in his 70s and was a practicing *dukun*. He lived in a remote place outside of the village. The village society was still dominated by the matrilineages and the traditional customs of the Minangkabau society. It was located around 130 kilometers from the local capital, Padang. The Minangkabau family system has attracted many scholars due to its matrilineal system (Stark, 2013).

The *bomoh* (term of a traditional healer in Malaysia) was Mrs. Aliah (pseudonym) from the Malaysian state of Kelantan. She is in her forties and lives in a terraced house in Kota Bharu, the capital of Kelantan. As a divorced mother, she lives together with her children. In an urban area, the cost of living in the city is higher than in a rural area. Consequently, she is concurrently employed as a part-time cook at a restaurant during the day.

Ethnography

The researchers visited both shamans and conducted qualitative interviews that were unstructured and open-ended in nature. One of the major objectives was their healing methods. However, it was soon discovered that they had their own type of business concept.

In both research settings, i.e., the village community and the city, the patients have the choice to consult a biomedical or traditional healer. The researchers asked the surrounding inhabitants when they would contact a shaman, and the replies were evident: They said that there are illnesses that cannot be treated by biomedicine, like disorders that are related to magic.

The researchers observed both healers in a non-participant way. This means the researchers could just observe how the shamans behaved in particular circumstances. It was decided to consider the recommendations that were described by Gobo (2008). He stressed that it is necessary to look at 'minor' details: for example, the situation within the house, what kind of patients consult the shamans, and so on. The socioeconomic context played a crucial role in determining the individual's earnings. There was a lack of standardized pricing, implying that patients with higher incomes were expected to pay a greater amount.

Data and Discussion

This chapter will provide an outline of the entrepreneurial activities of the Malay shamans. Various factors were taken into account, such as the impact of household and business endeavors.

Household Economy

Throughout thousands of years, the household has been the paramount component of the traditional economy. Some researchers stressed that the household members discussed about money that had to be spent (Kooreman & Wunderink, 1997). In the case of the shamans, such elements played a crucial role, too. However, the extra income from the treatment sessions and the relative monetary independence, due to the fact that many medicinal plants grow on the land or were brought by the patients, enabled them to limit the expenses.

The two shamans live in two different environments. Shaman Nabil lives in a village community of the Minangkabau society. The social structure of the Minangkabau is ruled by matrilineal kinship. This means that the children are members of the same matrilineage as the mother. The land belongs in general to the matrilineage and will be inherited according to the matrilineal descendants (Benda-Beckmann, 1979). On the other side, there is the opportunity to achieve individual property. Shaman Nabil lives on the land of his wife. Many of the healing plants can be found around the house (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The House of Nabil

(Source: Private Property of the Researchers)

The Shaman as Teacher

Nabil was a very experienced healer, and he was also active as a teacher. The researchers met two of his students. However, in order for them to be accepted as students, they are required to carry out a specific ritual in which they present him with a particular quantity of gold. In general, Nabil could rely on subsistence economy. His house was surrounded by a garden that was filled with a variety of fruits and vegetables, including rambutan, bananas, corn, and beans, among other things. He also had a number of chickens. This kind of environment led to independence in so far as he could act in a less regular way than other medical practitioners.

The students of Nabil invited him in the evening hours. Then he taught them some of his knowledge. Usually, he gave them a specific supplication and how to use it. In a kind of reciprocal response, the students provided him with food and paid him a small amount of money.

The Shaman as Healer and Entrepreneur

Probably the most important feature is that the shaman is contacted by the people in order to heal certain medical disorders. The researchers asked the people in the village about the reasons why they consulted a traditional medical practitioner, and they gave the reasons. Here are some selected excerpts from the informal talks:

"I go to the dukun because he lives nearby and is cheap."

"His healing method is quick and effective."

"The bomoh is a specialist. The doctor in the clinic cannot treat all illnesses."

The patients go to the house of the healers if they want to be treated. Nabil receives them in his living room. Usually, he can be contacted at any time; however, it would be more convenient in the evening when he is less likely to be occupied with tasks such as shopping. Nabil listens to the patients and treats them directly or prescribes some herbal remedies. The patients can pay whatever they feel is appropriate. This is also the case regarding the patients of Mrs. Aliah. This system is quite intriguing. All the patients pay quite generously.

Paranormal illnesses may include continual medical interventions or even the use of more effective plants. It can be said that this type of treatment is like a regular income for the healers. Some of the patients had a critical attitude. When the researchers talked to them, they said that the healers would not use an effective treatment method at the first meeting.

The following major points in the field of traditional entrepreneurship of the Malay shamans were discovered:

- A) The healers do not follow a specific timetable, and they are also willing to go to the house of the patient. This kind of behavior is an advantage for them, as the patient might consult the traditional healers due to their availability.
- B) The healer prescribes the healing plants that are planted on their own land or order the patients to bring them (after having them told which plants are needed). This is a cost-effective solution since it efficiently saves both time and money.
- C) There is no specialized staff that receives a salary. In case, something is required, family members help.
- D) The shamans use their own living room as a place for treatment. In some cases, he or she might go to the patient's place.
- E) The shamans are not healers in the strict sense. They also help with other activities, for example, finding lost items. Therefore, there are many potential customers.
- F) The healers are not in a competitive situation. This means that if they think that another person is more qualified, then they recommend that the patient goes to another healer.
- G) In rare cases, it is possible to recite certain invocations over a long distance.
- H) The Malay shaman in the urban environment has started to sell specific utensils that are believed to possess protective properties, like a particular type of ring (see Figure 2). The healer assumes that these rings originate from another dimension.



Fig. 2. Some Rings That Can be Bought on Request.

(Source: Private Property of the Researchers)

The listed points show that the way shamans act is cost-efficient and flexible. The shaman does not require the rental of a designated location or the employment of personnel. Furthermore, the shamans share the worldview of the local population. Therefore, it is easy to find common topics. Nowadays, there is a worldwide trend for esoteric knowledge (Ross, 2023) and local wisdom (Stark & Hassan, 2023). The shamans are part of these entrepreneurial activities that follow the growing demand. In the case of the Malay shamans, it must be said that they are part of the so-called folk beliefs. Many people still believe in ghosts and other invisible entities. Therefore, the shamans will use wording and prescriptions from the same context. In the informal talks, the patients said that sometimes they cannot understand the biomedical doctors and they feel to be treated in a clinical way, which means the biomedical doctor does not listen to their concerns.

Discussion: The Four R's and The Entrepreneurial Role of The Shaman

Although the Malay Shaman does not represent the indigenous population, their teachings are partially derived from a pre-existing system predating the emergence of major religions. In the case of the Minangkabau, there was interaction between indigenous tribes and the Minangkabau in the Malay peninsula (Yatim, 2015). In the past, the situation in Sumatra was similar. There are reports that there were close connections between indigenous people and the Minangkabau (Isdarwanto & Zulfa, 2010). Most likely, there was also an exchange of goods and the acceptance of parts of the belief system in the pre-Islamic period.

The case of Aliah is intriguing due to her residence in an urban setting, which likely provides different conditions when compared to the shaman residing in the village. She works part-time to get an extra income. So, it can be said that the urban environment differs and necessitates a higher salary to attain a desirable standard of living. On the other side, in the rural village, social cohesion is stronger. Kinship plays a more important role.

In the following discussion, it will be interesting to look at the four R's that were formulated by some scientists:

- A) Relationship: The shaman has contact with people from all social strata of society.
- B) Responsibility: The traditional healers act in a responsible way. They know that they cannot treat all kinds of medical disorders. Therefore, they recommend other traditional healers or biomedical doctors.

- C) Reciprocity: In the village community, there is a close reciprocal feeling, particularly amongst the members of the same matrilineage. The shaman helps a sick person, and as a response, he or she will help in a different way. The Malay shamans are embedded in the Malay culture, and one important trait is the concept of *budi* (Za'ba, 2020), which describes good moral contact. If someone does a favor to another person, then the person is in a kind of debt (*hutang budi*) and needs to reply in a reciprocal way. Such a system is useful and strengthens social cohesion.
- D) Redistribution: This concept plays a minor role in the urban environment compared with the living conditions in the village. The *dukun* is part of society. Nabil belongs to a certain matrilineage. He offers his help in matters pertaining to health and sickness. Furthermore, the matrilineage of the wife owns some paddy fields. After the harvest, the income will be redistributed, which allows Nabil to act quite independently.

The four R's, commonly referred to as the principles of indigenous entrepreneurship, play a crucial role in the debate of this topic. It can also be applied in the traditional entrepreneurial concept of the Malay shaman. Additionally, it might serve as a source of inspiration for other medical professionals who are actively engaged in the realm of alternative medicine. For example, such medical practitioners could apply certain features, like taking more time to talk with the patients or having flexible consultation hours.

It is also possible to expand the 4 R's model with two more points, namely:

- Eco-friendly: The Malay shaman uses ingredients that are eco-friendly, like flowers and herbs, that can be easily absorbed by nature. This is in sharp contrast to chemical tablets.
- Holistic: The healers use a holistic approach. For example, they not only address the symptoms, such as a headache, but also investigate the underlying reason in a more comprehensive manner. Perhaps factors such as stress, improper dietary choices, or other variables have contributed to the development of the medical condition.

Conclusion

In this research paper, the entrepreneurial concept of the Malay shaman was analyzed. In recent years, non-Western entrepreneurial systems have become of interest to many researchers. As a consequence, the entrepreneurial endeavors of the shamans are intriguing and have the potential to serve as a source of inspiration for entrepreneurs in all industries. The rural shaman operates independently from the market system as a result of its subsistence economy. On the other side, the shaman in the urban area must work part-time in order to get more income.

In this paper, it was also shown that the Malay shaman has to use an entrepreneurial concept that minimizes costs like salary for staff and is attractive in an environment that can be described as medical pluralism. The strength of traditional healers is that they can be easily reached without bureaucratic procedures and that their worldview contains elements of so-called folk beliefs. All of these elements are interesting and might be inspiring.

In this article, it was illustrated that the already-existing concept of the 4 R's is useful and can be applied to the healing methods of the traditional Malay shaman. It can even be extended.

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