

Healthcare Practices of Rural Malay Women: The Role of Religion and Cultural Context

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Abstract. Healthcare is one of the important aspects in human's life that always taken for granted. This study is done on a group of rural Malay women in one of the traditional village in Perak, Malaysia to discover their healthcare practices. It aims to unfold the healthcare practices of rural Malay women and how religion and culture plays a role in influencing such practices. The approach used for this research is through anthropology health studies where participant observation and intensive interviews were done with the Malay women being studied. The study focused on the repetitive and ongoing action of healthcare practices done by these women for a better health which includes daily hygiene routine, doing exercises, massages, prayers, fasting, eating habits and also the taboos and old folk advice in maintaining their health. It evolves from the belief system, norms and values place on the health care practices. The result shows that religion and culture plays an important role in preparing a passage for health care. All the different sorts of health care activities done by the Malay women are deeply influenced by religion and culture. In conclusion, this study proves that the Malay women being studied really appreciate their health. They know that health is something precious and should be given due attention in order to avoid discomfort and inconvenience.

1. Introduction

Healthcare is an important aspect of human life, but it is often overlooked and taken for granted (Shariffah Suraya, 2013; Henkivsky, 2012; Saltonstall, 1993). Health has a close relationship with the attitudes, beliefs, worldview and way of life of a group of people. Each community has their own beliefs about health care. They also have the distinctive and specific guidance about the proper treatment to maintain health and at the same time prevent illness (Eliana, 2011). This study focuses on the practice of health care and how religion and culture affect health behaviors practiced by rural Malay women. The approach used in the production of this research is to use a method in which health anthropological participant observation and in-depth interview with the rural Malay women studied. The focus of this study is that health care practices performed by rural Malay women in taking care of their health, including daily hygiene and the use of taboos and traditional tips on maintaining their health. Culture has a significant influence on many aspects of human life, including beliefs, perceptions, knowledge, values and practices, and has important implications for health and health care (Bodeker, 2009; Helman, 1990). It is also a set of guidelines (directly or indirectly) inherited by an individual as a member of society. It provides the practitioner information and skills that can be used by communities to health care.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the healthcare practices observed by the rural Malay women in one of the traditional villages in North of Perak, Malaysia. This paper addressed three main questions (i) What is the perception of rural Malay women on health? (ii) To what extent do Malay women in this study adhere to the cultural and religious beliefs on the healthcare practices (iii) Do taboos and old folk advice influenced their healthcare practices?

1.3 Methods

The data presented in this paper were collected as a part of the study on the healthcare of rural Malay women in one of the traditional village in North of Perak. The data were collected over the 8 months of my stay in the community. A total of 55 women from all range of ages were interviewed. In depth interviews with the Malay women were used to gather information on the cultural and religious teachings surrounding the healthcare practices, taboos and old folk advices on healthcare practices. Participant observation and in depth interviews were used to collect contextual data on the healthcare practices of rural Malay women. Data were collected on their actual behavior by visiting the informants at home and those of others in the household (documenting advice from the elders; mom, grandmothers). Informal interviews were conducted with the key informants (midwives in the village). Each interview was tape recorded. The considerable time I spent living with the communities provided plentiful opportunities to observe and talk with the community members about their lives and beliefs. I also attended a number of ceremonies and participated in village activities to get more information on the subject studied. In order to gather information on their eating habits, the participants were asked to list down all the food they take in the diet. I also recorded information on why certain foods were classified as taboo or restricted in recovering or maintaining their health. A thematic analysis approach was used to derive patterns in the women's responses. Recordings of interviews were transcribed for detailed analysis. The transcripts were examined on the women's explanations related to the concept concerned. From these, several themes emerged. Verbatim quotations are used to illustrate responses on relevant themes.

2. Rural Malay Women's Perception of Health

Health is something that is appreciated by every human being. The Malays regard health as a gift from God that is priceless and should be treated well (Hashim Awang, 2000). While everyone has an opinion, perception on health, mostly acknowledged that health is important and should be treated with care. Malay women generally regarded health as a blessing or grace from God Almighty and is invaluable. Good health and healthy body is very much appreciated by them. As one informant said, "Health is wealth and cannot be bought with money." Thus, according to them, people should strive to take care of themselves, and if they were afflicted with the disease, they must strive to treat it. As illness is inconvenient and annoying not only to those who experience it, but also to their family, neighbors and villagers in general, the rural Malay women desperately trying to maintain their health by avoiding doing things that can affect their health.

2.1 Healthcare Practices of Rural Malay Women

Healthcare practices of rural Malay women begin with the basic hygiene practices in the context of everyday behavior. The hygiene practices of rural women were highly influenced by their religious beliefs, customs and culture. Malay culture and traditions rich with values, that becoming the guidelines of the Malay communities and passes down from generation to generation. As the saying says, life is conceived with custom, die conceived with land.

2.1.1: Physical Cleanliness

The rural Malay women know that cleanliness is important for good health. Their healthcare begins with the cleanliness at the individual level. Body hygiene covers the entire body starting from the head to toe. Since childhood, Malay women have applied the hygiene practice. The practice of circumcision is common among the Malay girls. Although circumcision of girls is not compulsory and only recommended (*sunnah*) according to the teachings of Islam, but most of Malay parents opt to circumcised their daughters. When asked the reason they circumcised their daughters, most informants said due to Malay customs and Islamic teachings that encourage this practice to be done. According to majority of the informants, circumcision is seen as a good practice, and it is one of the methods of cleaning the genital part which is the breeding ground for germs, which can cause harm to health. Most Malay parents perform circumcision on their daughters when the baby is still small, a few days after birth. Daughters were usually circumcised since they were 40 days until 12 years to simplify and avoid pain. Often after the mothers' confinement 44 days, midwives are called to do the ritual circumcision of the girls. Small feast will be held by the parents of the girls to celebrate the event.

Often, it is done simultaneously with the crown cutting event (hair shaving) for the child. Hair shaving is one of the customs that is practiced by the Malays in Malaysia. According to the informants, Islam encourages the practice of shaving the baby's hair until entirely bald, so that all the dirt out of the uterus can be removed, allowing the new hair to grow healthily. According to the Islamic practice, the hair shaving is *sunnat muakkad* (required to do) and good for baby boys and girls (Adi Hashman, 2011). According to one informant who held a hair shaving and circumcision ceremony for her daughter, by shaving the baby's hair, it will remove the baby's weak hair and this will help to nourish the baby's scalp. During the hair shaving ceremony, several events took place, such as reading or singing (*berzanji*) with the words of praising Allah the All Mighty. The baby will be carry by her mother/father to the groups of women who are reciting the praising words of Allah the All Mighty. This is to broadcast readings of religious scripture on the baby. Some of the materials used at the hair shaving ceremony including a tray of potpourri, young coconut, where it is cut open and the water is not removed, betel leaves, the sprinklers and the scented water. Then, the shaved baby's hair will be put into the rip open coconut. Finally, the coconut filled with the newly shaved hair will be planted around the home.

Malay women are very concerned about personal hygiene including their physical cleanliness, and also the spiritual cleanliness. Physical cleanliness is through the regular bathing which is necessary in a hot and humid climate. Normally, Malay women baths three times daily: morning, noon and evening or dusk. Individuals who do not bath regularly are considered dirty because when they perspire their bodies smell. Besides the regular bathing, there is also the ritual bathing. Ritual bathing is carried out in certain occasions such as, after having sexual intercourse, and in case of women after having their menstruation. Ritual bathing requires a *niat* (intention), a statement of the intention to take such a bath in the name of God (Allah the Al Mighty). This kind of bath is a religious obligation. Only by performing this bath, can the Malay Muslim women performing other rituals such as performing prayers and reciting the Quran.

Furthermore, fingers nail are kept short and clean because Malays use their hands to eat with. Hand washing is required before and after meals. According to the Malay cultures, eating with the right hand is associated with cleanliness, purity, and polite custom. Eating with the left hand is not allowed because the left hand is considered dirty since it is used for washing oneself after urinating or defecating. Foot hygiene also taken care as foot is very important in healthcare. Starting from

childhood, the children are taught not to wear shoes in the house. Children are always reminded to wear shoes when playing outside the house in order to avoid dirt on the soles of shoes brought into the house. Malay women are very particular about this as they perform their prayers in the house that need cleanliness and purity. In the past, a jar containing water was placed near the steps at the front door to enable residents or guests to wash their feet before entering the house. Nowadays, rarely they put a container of water outside the house because everyone wears shoes. Children are constantly reminded to clean their feet before entering the house because they sometimes take off their shoes while playing outdoors. In Malay cultures, who does not take off their shoes when entering the house was considered impolite and shows that the person does not know the customs.

2.1.2 Spiritual Cleanliness

Malay women are very particular about the food they take and serve their family. One of the informants says "The kinds of food we take is very important, we must know whether it is permitted or not before taking it and serve our family, as the food becomes flesh and blood, and will be with the person forever". Malay women avoid religiously prohibited food such as pork and intoxicating drinks such as alcohol. Besides that, they are also very concern with the sources of food whether the money they get it are from the permitted sources (working) or unethical sources (stealing). One also encouraged to gives to the poor and those in needs. Such good deeds help to clean oneself spiritually. Apart from that, Malay women also perform a special prayer once in a while, especially late at night, asking God to provide them health and strength so that they can enjoy life and at the same time fulfill their obligations.

2.2 Food for Health

Nutrition is the cornerstone in health care. Adequate and balanced nutrition is an important aspect in determining the achievement of good health. Healthy people should take care of his nutrition in order to stay in good health. For rural Malay women, food is very important to them. According to the view of the world (world view) them, food is a source that supplies energy to enable them to carry out everyday tasks . Health will be interrupted if there is a deficiency in their diet. said one informant. The purpose of eating, according to them, is to eliminate hunger and ensure survival. They realize that food is an important requirement in their lives because through it, they obtain nutrients and energy to carry out daily activities. According Selarong Malay women, food is anything that can be eaten and the type of food eaten depends on the religious beliefs and customs of their culture . As one informant said, "Food is anything that we can eat, but must be approved by the religion and our culture. Rural Malay women divide the food according to the two factors; the religious factor and the principle of hot and cold.

Food taken in the Malay society is determined by the religious factors. For the Malay community, there is a clear nutritional guidance in the Holy Book of Quran. Religious prohibition is one of the factors that determine which food can be eaten by the Malay women. Muslims are prohibited from eating the forbidden foods like intoxicating drinks and foods, Ways to prepare the foods are also mentioned in the Quran. For example, all of the animals that may be eaten must be slaughtered in advance with the name of Allah the Almighty and follows the Islamic rules. Apart from the religious factors in determining the food that can be taken, the rural Malay women also understand and apply the principles of hot and cold. They believe that everything in nature has hot and cold elements. In Malaysia, the hot-cold classifications are used widely by all three major ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese and Indians). The classification of food as hot and cold in Malaysia could be predicted by

nutritive value, since those foods deemed cold tend to have higher water content, less protein, lower fat, lower carbohydrate, less protein, lower fat and fewer calories. Hot foods include animal protein food, fried food, condiments and spicy dishes, herbal concoctions and few local fruits; for example *durian* and *rambutan*. The classification relates not to actual temperature of the food or usually to its spiciness or its raw or cooked state, but to the reputed effect of the food on the body. A 'hot' food is said to heat the body; a 'cold' food cools the body. Health is maintained through equilibrium. Overindulgence in a particular food may cause an imbalance of hot or cold and may lead to illness (Shariffah Suraya, 2013)

There are foods that are not suitable for consumption for certain time because it can disturb the harmony of the hot and cold elements in the body. According to one informant, she was advised to eat a balanced diet cold and heat element to prevent the disease. Her mother had forbidden her to eat watermelon during cold and rainy weather due to fear of getting colds and flu. Most informants agree that eating at the right time can keep the hot and cold elements of harmony in the body and thus maintain good health. Element imbalances in the body can cause diseases. This classification is a guide in determining what can be eaten, in what circumstances the food can be eaten, and the consequences if the rules are not adhered to. Cold food is often taken to cool the body. Foods that have these cool elements should be avoided during a cold weather in the early morning and late at night, especially during the post-natal period. According to the rural Malay women, women who have given birth should avoid cold and icy drinks and cold vegetables to prevent disease in old age. These include vegetables such as cucumber, pineapples, watermelon and coconut should not be taken regularly as they are not good for the women's health. On the other hand, hot food consists of foods that have fat (animal or plant fat), spices, spicy foods, foods containing animal protein, fried foods as well as salty and bitter foods. Hot food in this category usually gives energy, rich in protein and increases the blood. Often the hot food was taken during cold weather, at night and when the body feels cold. Postpartum women who have lost a lot of blood should eat a hot element to restore the blood content in the body. Even so, the hot food is eaten in excess can cause sore throat, dry and sore throat, fever, headache, vomiting, diarrhea and sleeping difficulty. Apart from the distribution of food to hot and cold elements, rural Malay women also expand distribution of food into itchy, sharp, poisonous and windy foods (Manderson, 1981). Cold foods were also classified as windy food as it can cause bloating, stomach cramps, headache and fever. It was considered safe for consumption when a person was in good health. Foods classified as sharp, such as pineapples, vinegar and mangoes, should be avoided during the early pregnancy, confinement, or during menstruation. Informants identified sharp foods by their effects on the body, coughing, sore throat, ulcers and blisters in the mouth, stomach ache and diarrhea.

Itchy food usually consists of seafood, including fish, squid, shrimp, crab and so on. These foods were predominantly attributed with causing general itchiness, rashes, pimples and sores, coughing and throat irritation. If a person already had sores, dermatitis or skin infection, the condition would deteriorate if itchy food were eaten. Muslim boys who had been newly circumcised and women during the confinement were also proscribed itchy food. These foods were believed to inhibit healing and cause festering in the circumcision wound or in broken skin in or near birth canal. Food classified as poison were often also itchy food. The term poison was used to indicate the toxicity of certain foods. Thus itchy food was also poison if a person had skin lesions or a rash, for it would worsen the skin condition if taken. Moreover, in the Holy Quran mentioning the prohibition of mixed land we eat seafood, for example a person who eats rice with meat, then he's not advisable to mix food with seafood, such as shrimp, squid and fish. However, the mixing of land and sea foods are not considered illegal if eaten together, but it may be harmful to health. In terms of nutrition, 'land' food have

positive ions while seafood containing negative ions. If both of these foods are mixed there will be an active biochemical reactions in the body, thus can damage the intestines.

Table 1: Food that were categorized as hot, cold, poison, sharp, itchy and windy by the rural Malay women

Hot	Cold	Poison	Sharp	Itchy	Windy
Durian	Bananas	Chicken	Pineapple	Trevally fish	Brinjal
Rambutan	Mangosteen	Trevally fish	Lime	Mackerel fish	Pumpkin
Ginger	Papaya	Catfish	Mango	Sardine fish	Horse mango
Black pepper	Watermelon	Catfish Eel	Vinegar	Tuna fish	Jackfruit
Turmeric	Soursop	Cockles crabs	Fermented sour-dough snack	Prawns	Cassava
Chili	Cassava	Mangoes		Cuttlefish	Sweet potato
Roots	Cabbage	Horse mango		Crabs	Yam
Spices	Mustard greens	Coconut water		Cockles	Eggplant
Mutton	Spinach	Cane juice		Tubers	Drumstick
Medicinal herbs	Long beans	Vinegar		Egg	Pithecellobium jiringa
Meat	Green beans	Pineapples		Fish crackers	Parkia speciosa
Honey	Bean Sprouts	Fern shoots			Butternut squash
Egg	Pumpkin	Glutinous rice			Horse beans
Fermented sour-dough snack	Sweet shoots				Corn
Languas galanga	Cucumber				

2.3. Physical activity

Malay women believe that they need to do the exercise and move their body in order to maintain their health. Starting from wake up, veins and body should be straighten and tightened so that the blood will flow smoothly. According to Malay women, all people should do the exercise as they believe that the movement of the body such as legs, arms, head and waist are needed to correct the veins and blood flow. A person's health can be affected if there is lack of body movement. The rural Malay women realize lack of physical activity can be hazardous to health. However, this is not a problem to the rural Malay women especially the villagers because most of them are involved in strenuous physical activities, being either rubber tappers or farmers. Apart from that, among the older generation, the usual way to induce sweating is by doing odd jobs such as tending the garden, cleaning the house compound and planting the trees. In contrast with the older generation, the younger generation involve themselves in various physical activities such as jogging, playing badminton and doing aerobics. The female teenagers in the village usually involve with the youth association where they have various physical activities such as camping, playing games and others.

Women who have just given birth are those who are encouraged to do exercises to restore their health. They are encouraged to make easy and simple exercise to restore their health. It is important for women to do exercises in order to strengthen and streamline the back of her body, especially her buttock, tight, abdomen and uterus to return to its original position. There are various types of exercises that should be practiced by women after childbirth and who have given birth. Among the exercises is the stretching exercise. Stretching exercise is done repeatedly to tighten the uterus veins, and also the veins in the buttocks. Women, who frequently gave birth often facing internal problems such as vaginal discharge and fluffy vagina if not properly cared for. There were also having problems such as cannot control urine when sneezing and laughing. The exercise done to overcome this problem is the pelvic exercise. These exercises can strengthen pelvic muscles. Pelvic muscles can

become weak and loose due to factors such as being overweight, age, childbirth and do not exercise regularly.

2.4 Massage

Massage is one of the activities performed by the Malay women to maintain their health. Massage, including act of holding, rubbing and pressing certain parts of the body in order to get rid of aches. Apart from revitalize the body and relieve muscle tension, massage can also improve blood circulation and wind stuck in the body. Traditional midwives are the experts in massaging women. Women after childbirth are those who always practice the massage. The massage practice is done to restore the health of the mother after giving birth and soothe the body. The midwives start by massaging the postpartum mother in the womb, to lift it back to its original place. After that, the hands and feet are massaged to eliminate numbness and fatigue. The mother's neck is also massaged to relieve stress. Hair was pulled up neatly and tied in the middle of the head to avoid headaches. The midwives also massaged the mother's breasts to increase the milk. The good massage can help restoring blood flow, and eliminate dirty blood from the body of the new mom. The practice of massage is usually performed for three consecutive days to restore blood circulation.

Besides the maternity women, women who reached the menopause age also practice the massage. One of the informants, Tijah (55 years old) said she has difficulty to sleep, and her body is always hot and sweating. She went for a refreshing massage to relax her mind. Once sorted, Tijah feels more refreshed and energetic. There is also Malay woman who get a massage service as a routine every month, especially for those who are too tired working. This massage is done on all parts of the body to freshen up a tired body and get rid of tension.

2.5 Healthcare taboos and old folk advices to stay healthy

Taboos and old folk advices are the important aspects of healthcare activities in the traditional medical system of the Malay community. The rural Malay women also practice the traditional taboos and old folk advices in their health care. There are a variety of plants that are used to protect and maintain health. A lot of remedies are made from plant's ingredients for maintaining health and beauty. One of which that is often used by the rural Malay women is the medicinal herbs. The medicinal herb (*jamu*) is a traditional remedy that has been used by older people to maintain health and beauty of the body and it is still being used until now. These herbs are often consumed by the mothers in confinement to shrink the womb and restore bodily form like before giving birth. The older generation practices drinking herbal medicine since teenagers. Herbal medicine is made from natural ingredients, such as plants, leaves and roots, fruits and flowers with nutrients to maintain health and beautify the body. Some of the plants used to make *Jamu* is *cekur* (*Kaemferia galangal* Linn.), Cloves (*Eugenia aromatica*), cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*), ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), spicy fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) and *lempoyang* (*Zingiber aromaticum*) has a lot of nutrients. Among the nutritional value are, it clears the menstrual blood flow, strengthen the body and refresh the face. According to the informants, it must be practiced regularly and not just once or twice to get its effectiveness. It can be seen from the look of the informants who practiced it which looks younger than their real age and their body is still strong.

In addition there are a few tips that were practiced by the rural Malay women to preserve their health. Some of the informants practice drinking boiled water and avoid ice cubes. According to the informants, cold drinks are not good for our body, as it will make the body becoming weak, especially for women who gave birth. One of the informants, Rosma (43), said she drinks 8 glasses of water per day. She rarely drink sugar drink and prefers to drink plain water for maintaining her health. Another informant, Mak Su Miah (57 years old), has been drinking brewed roots continuously. Brewed root is

good to wash the blood and strengthen the body. Despite her bitter taste, it is good for health. Other informant, Ana (45 years old) practices eating a spoonful of honey with chicken egg every morning to strengthen the body and maintain her health.

3. Conclusion

This study shows that religion and culture plays an important role in providing access to health care. Rural Malay women, as a whole, still sticking to the taboos and old folk advices in their health care. The rural Malay women have their own way to take care of their health. They use a mechanism of religion, tradition and culture to ensure that the maximum health will be achieved. Their daily hygiene practices, eating habits, physical activities show that, in general, they are conscious of their state of health and the necessity of taking care of it. They know that health is something precious and should be given due attention in order to avoid discomfort and inconveniences. In conclusion, the rural Malay women appreciate their health and always look forward to maintain their health over time.

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