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The Traditional Healer in the Context of a Changing World

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Abstract

While the healing rituals and practices of the traditional Melanau shaman have been well documented in previous studies, the variety of Melanau healers and healing practices that exist is less apparent from the literature. Drawing on fieldwork research, this paper begins with an exploration of these diversities that includes healing practices, initiation experiences and Melanau concepts of illness, and traces how the role of the traditional healer in the Melanau communities has evolved to meet the challenge of social and cultural change over the past fifty years.

In the 21st century, increasing urbanization and development have issued new challenges to the status and viability of the traditional healing role, including the issue of regulation and integration of traditional healers within the wider Malaysian health system. The continuing relevance of the traditional healers and their contribution to wellbeing in local Melanau communities is explored in the context of these issues and debates.

Introduction

This paper begins with an ethnographic description of the Melanau traditional healer, based on fieldwork conducted in kampongs on the Mukah, Oya and Balingian rivers in Sarawak. Through the description of healing practices, initiation experiences and Melanau concepts of illness, it traces how the role of the traditional healer in the Melanau communities has evolved and adapted to meet the challenge of social and cultural change over the past fifty years.

In the 21st century, increasing urbanization and development have issued new challenges to the status and viability of the traditional healing role, including the issue of regulation and integration of traditional healers within the wider Malaysian health system. The continuing relevance of the traditional healers and their contribution to wellbeing in local Melanau communities is explored in the context of these issues and debates.

The ethnographic material was collected in 2000 and 2001 - during long term fieldwork research in the area, and from 2006 to the present - on short research visits from Kuching.¹

¹ Social, cultural and linguistic differences are acknowledged to occur between the various Melanau communities. Hence, the ethnographic details should not be considered representative of all Melanau communities in the area or indeed of other Melanau populations living in the wider Mukah Division. Nor does this paper make any claim that the views presented are necessarily sanctioned by all members of a particular Melanau community in the fieldwork area.