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Divine Concept of the Belief in Datok Gong in Malaysia

Parveen Kaur^{1*}, Arif Jawaid², Eong Yih Fang³, Chen Yoong Li³, Khor Jin Sin³,
Sivashunmugam Sangaran⁴

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia

² Professor, Lahore Garrison University, Pakistan

³ Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia

⁴ Medical Officer, Bintulu Hospital, Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract:

In this modern world, there are still beliefs in supernatural existence. These beliefs have undergone alterations in accordance with the worshippers' socio-environmental changes. The study explored *Datok Gong*'s perceptions by his worshipers based on their relationships with him and examined factors contributing to this faith. This research endeavored to explore the anthropological and sociological interpretations of Sino-Malay spirit belief in Malaysia, commonly known as *Datok Gong*. This study was conducted in four different states in Malaysia on twelve respondents coming from different ethnicities and age groups. In-depth interviews and observations were used in this research. This research identified four main ideas of religious relationships, which were supernatural, socio-economic, daily routine, and symbolic. It also explored the factors contributing to the faith in *Datok Gong* that were unearthed and worshippers' perceptions in relation to daily life experiences. The findings show that the majority of the respondents perceived *Datok Gong* as a living person with supernatural powers. This study would benefit society and the stakeholders to create new knowledge about belief systems.

Keywords: *Datok Gong*, *Datok Keramat*, Chinese, beliefs, religion, Malaysia.

马来西亚拿督功信仰的神圣观念

Corresponding Author: Parveen Kaur, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia; email: sspkaur@unimas.my

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摘要:

在这个现代世界，仍然存在对超自然存在的信仰。这些信仰随着崇拜者社会环境的变化而发生变化。该研究探讨了拿督公的崇拜者根据他们与拿督公的关系对他的看法，并研究了促成这种信仰的因素。本研究致力于探索马来西亚华裔马来人精神信仰（俗称拿督公）的人类学和社会学解释。这项研究是在马来西亚的四个不同州属中针对来自不同种族和年龄组的12名受访者进行的。本研究采用了深入访谈和观察。这项研究确定了宗教关系的四种主要观念，即超自然关系、社会经济关系、日常生活关系和象征关系。它还探讨了出土的对拿督公信仰的影响因素以及信徒对日常生活经历的看法。调查结果显示，大多数受访者认为拿督公是一个具有超自然力量的活人。这项研究将有利于社会和利益相关者创造有关信仰体系的新知识。

关键词: 拿督贡, 拿督克拉末, 华人, 信仰, 宗教, 马来西亚。

1. Introduction

The notion of religion and beliefs lies behind trusting and believing in the existence of a special power that is beyond human capability (Durkheim, 1965). Both religions and beliefs are great contributing factors to a person's identity and the functions of society. Such illusionary existence described by Freud (in Wallwork, 1990) plays a major role in constituting society taboos, norms, and even laws that are highly dependent on human psychoanalytical capability. It has created a gendered society, the notion of a secular, mundane, and pagan view of cultures (Ng, 2020). The concern of this paper is to investigate how one perceives faith in accordance with the examination of the belief system of *Datok Gong* in Malaysia.

The work of Cheu Hock Tong in the early 1990s and his recent works on examining *Datok Gong* were published by Liyun in 2007, which focused on the aspects of socialization and localization of belief in *Datok Gong* in Malacca. An academic documentary by Bala from 2013, entitled *Datuk Gong: Spirit of the Land*, focused on belief as an integral part in understanding the development of both Chinese and Malay identities in Malaya.

All the previous researchers focused on how *Datok Gong* functioned in the society. Studies on belief in *Datok Gong* focused on functional and historical reviews. However, there is a need for updated information on the recent ongoing societal ideas. This study used an anthropological lens to explore the relationships and experiences between the worshipers and *Datok Gong*.

There is a need to relook at the whole concept of folk religion in Malaysian society, where cultural identity has been influenced by the western world and dominated by prejudgments (Ng, 2020). Consequently, over the last century, this belief has transformed itself at various stages by adapting local features in different localities, resulting in a diversification of identity, structure, and form (Chin & Lee, 2014). Thus, the focus of the study remains on the recent context to capture the changes and evaluate recent localization phenomena in the 21st century. In the modern context, worship of *Datok Gong* is important in the study of both Chinese and Malay identity in Malaysia (Wang, 2022). It has been generally observed that the belief is in a state of perpetual change, adapting itself to local cultures and

practices. This study will also confirm the extent of changes and adaptations.

Hence, the belief observed today is an assimilation of Chinese ancestor worship and Malay Keramat worship supplemented by rituals rooted in Taoism. However, this is only part of the concern; the major concern of this paper is how worshipers overcome such changes in accordance with the change in their socio-economic environment by evaluating how they perceive *Datok Gong* in this modern context. This is a new perspective from other previous researchers. Thus, this study was conducted to examine how socioeconomic development has impacted changes in the divine spirituality of *Datok Gong* among the worshipers. Consequently, the objectives of this study were to explore the perceptions of *Datok Gong* by worshipers based on their relationships with him and examine factors contributing to this faith.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Folk Religion/Religious Belief, Ancestral

According to Durkheim (1965), there are four fundamental elements in a belief system or religion, which are supernatural, divinity, beliefs, and rites. In such a sense, ancestor worship is in the supernatural element, beliefs, and rites, while Shamanism presents the element of magic, rites, and rituals.

The study of ancestors, ancestor worship, ancestorship, and the spirits of dead relatives seems comparable with the ethnography of Africa and China (See, 2012). The study of ancestor worship has been discussed since the early 20th century by sociologists like Durkheim and Weber, Couderc and Sillander (2012) through the writings of other anthropologists and historians providing a brand-new anthropological lens (analytical tool) of religion. The study of ancestorship in this case provides a new way to look at how societies organize themselves, their relationship to their beliefs and social structure, and the roles of their ancestors in life (Zhou, 2020).

Different societies have different ways of perceiving their ancestors, some regard ancestors as elders, deities possessing supernatural powers (Zhou, 2020). In societies where ancestors are revered and venerated, they believe the dead still live among them, especially the Chinese in Southeast Asia, as well as some

societies, specifically in Borneo (Malaysia). They believe that ancestors still could influence the fate of the living (Couderc & Sillander, 2012). Societies that venerate their ancestors can range from the veneration of their familial ancestors to the veneration of saints who are believed to mediate with God. Dalfovo's (1997) study on ancestor worship among the Lugbara people begs us to reconsider the terms "ancestor" or "ancestor worship" taken for granted by various anthropologists and sociologists. Couderc and Sillander (2012) and Dalfovo (1997) agreed that the concept of ancestor or ancestorship should be studied in a specific context, paying close attention to the local vernacular of the term.

However, Durkheim (1965) uses the term "ancestor cult" to explain the phenomena of ancestorship. He focuses more on the description of rituals, for example, sacrifices at cemeteries during certain times, offering of drinks, and feasts celebrated to honor the dead. The dead are recognized for their spiritual powers and honored during specific ceremonies. In certain circumstances, ancestors can turn into god-like figures. Durkheim (1965) also uses the term "cult of the dead" to refer to similar characteristics of ancestor worship. Yet, it is an important study of "animism", which Durkheim (1965) refers to the idea of "religion of spirits." For Durkheim (1965), "the cult of the dead" includes the idea of nature, as we tend to represent everything in our own image as living and thinking beings.

Couderc and Sillander (2012) critiqued that those previous studies including Durkheim's views on death and religious cults are too focused on rituals and rites. Yet, based on their anthropological study on ancestor worship in Borneo, they found that the fundamental significance of death lies upon how people use specific rituals, rites, ceremonies to venerate the dead people's spirit for the representation of the ideological significance of their ancestors (Tan, 2018). Besides, they found that the idea of ancestor is not restricted to a category of genealogical forebearers but rather it covers all influential predecessors from whom people trace their social or genealogical ancestry. As such, there are similarities and differences between the ideas of ancestor worship among the Chinese in Malaysia and in Borneo societies. However, the concept of ancestors in Borneo societies is inclusive and polythetic, as it includes the basic properties of social structure and religion.

Thus, the similarities between ancestor worship in Borneo and the veneration of *Datok Gong* among the Chinese in Malaysia are the beliefs in the presence of spiritual beings, the practice of veneration consisting of rituals and rites representing the relationship between the supernatural and the community. Furthermore, the veneration of *Datok Gong* among the Chinese in Malaysia is much more similar to Durkheim's (1965) idea on the belief of animism. According to Couderc and Sillander's (2012) idea on ancestor worship, the veneration of *Datok Gong* falls under the notion of

worshipping a social ancestor who does not have any blood linkage between the worshipers and *Datok Gong*, which leads to interesting findings.

2.2. Shamanism

Shamanism may be humankind's earliest and longest-lasting healing, psychotherapeutic, and religious tradition (Walsh, 1994). The term 'shaman' is derived from the Siberian Tungusic root *saman*, where the shaman usually refers to a male practitioner, while the word *shamanka* refers to a female (Hine, 1986). Even though research has been conducted in shamanism, scholars mostly focus on the aspect of psychology instead of the anthropological context where most of the scholars such as Walsh (1994) illustrated that shamans have everything from severely psychologically disturbed to virtual saints. Kent (2010) uses psychedelic information theory to view and define shamanism as a craft of evoking spontaneous organization of psychedelic information in a subject or group subjects to promote plasticity, imprinting, and transformation that fulfill the functions of therapy, sorcery, mind control, applied psychedelic science, targeted neuroplasticity, behavioral conditioning, and tribal bonding. While other scholars view shamans as healers or 'doctors,' in the context of medical anthropologists, ethnobiologist Wasson (as cited in Hine, 1986, p. 7) proposed that all major world religions grew from psychotropic experiences, and most shamanic cultures have some form of psychotropic plant associated with them. Traditional shamanism may be cloaked under the veil of superstition, but behind the veil is the real science of programming human belief and behavior with a blend of mysticism, ritual, and hallucinogenic drugs (Kent, 2010; Wang, 2022).

Langdon (2012) summarized anthropological shamanism and explained that classic studies were interested in shamans as individuals, often focusing on their mental state, deviance, abnormality, and primitive nature; some even argued that shamans had schizophrenic personalities. She further elaborated that reconstituting and revitalizing shamanism in contemporary society possesses special power.

2.3. Raymond Firth on Semangat Padi

However, Firth (1996) in his work on the magic of the 'rice soul' in Kelantan found that the concept of the *semangat padi* shows variation in the conventional ideas of the homogeneity of the treatment of the 'rice soul' throughout Malaya. Conversely, the cultivators recognized the validity of the notion of *semangat padi* as the vital principle of rice, but many cultivators with small crops did not do so even if the cultivator was a magical practitioner in other matters (Firth, 1996). He also argued that the agricultural magic in this area, Kelantan, was rather informal and casual. This is because the ritual activity often being modified and curtailed by individual and small operators (who cultivate less than 100-150 bushels of padi per season) totally ignored it. This suggests that *semangat padi*

belief is restricted to a small segment of the community.

2.4. The Concepts of Datok Gong and Datok Keramat

There is a dire need to distinguish the concepts of *Datok Gong* and *Datok Keramat* prevalent in the community. In this regard, Cheu (1992) argued that *Datok Gong* is different from *Datok Keramat*, but generally worshippers regardless of ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Indian, Orang Asli, the native people, or the Aborigines) refer to *Datok Gong* and *Datok Keramat* as saints. *Keramat* worship is an early legacy of Sufi Islam or Islamic mysticism (*tasawuf*), which was critical to the spread of mystical teachings through Islamic movements (Subhan, 1960). According to Skeat (1900), *Keramat* is of Arabic origin and can be translated to mean 'sacred' when it is used as an adjective to describe men, animals, plants, stones, etc. Cheu (1997) argued that the spread of *Keramat* worship directly emphasized saint worship rather than the true teaching of Islam per se. On the other hand, Osman (1989) and Endicott (1991) see *Keramat* as the most important key concept in Malay folk belief. Furthermore, Endicott (1991) disagrees that *Keramat* is ancestor worship. This suggests that these are superstitions and not part of Islam.

Skeat (1900) also argued that *Keramat*s are the graves of deceased holy men, the first founders of the village who cleared the primeval jungle, or people of local notoriety in a former period. The term *Keramat* can also be referred to something else, and this statement was supported by Winstedt's (1924) study on 50 cases of *Keramat*, classifying them into six categories, which are believing in (1) natural objects, (2) sacred tigers and crocodiles, (3) graves of magicians, (4) graves of the founders of settlements, (5) graves of Muslim saints, and (6) living Muslim saints. Cheu (1997) classified Winstedt's six categories into two main categories: animate and inanimate objects. Osman (1989) adds these categories with new sets; belief in *Keramat* objects possessing magical power where *Keramat* is seen as a relic of animism and belief in natural objects (See, 2012). Finally, these are all *bida'at*s (innovations in religious matters) and are not part of Islam.

2.5. Why Do Malays Find Worshipping Keramat Irrelevant?

Cheu (1997) argued that the Malays still visit and worship *Keramat*, but many Muslim scholars (ulamas) of the Sunni sect have frequently spoken against such a practice. However, Cheu (1997) could not deny the fact that many Malays, regardless of their age, had found belief in *Keramat* no longer relevant to them anymore. This happened because various *dakwah* movements have called on Muslim folks back to the right doctrine (See, 2012). Malacca Religious Affairs Department is an example of this movement where the department succeeded in putting *Keramat* worship to a stop (Osman, 1989). Another reason proposed is that *Keramat* is no longer seen as a gift from Allah SWT,

but as the supernatural power of the 'saint' which is not confined to people held in high religious esteem (Osman, 1989). However, *Keramat* is seen as a form of polytheism (See, 2012). Meanwhile, See (2012) elaborated that *Keramat* is not yet eliminated but has been relegated to a somewhat less visible role than before.

2.6. Datok Gong

Cheu (1997) defined the term *Datok Gong* composed of *Datok* and *Gong*, both referring to grandfathers in Malay and Chinese, respectively. Tan (1988) suggested that the Baba usage of *Datok* for deities is a loan translated from the Hokkien word, which means grandfather. The Chinese also use *Gong* as an honorific title for deities or holy persons, who are worshipped as *Keramat*s or saints (Tan, 1988), which means 'the Grand One' or 'the Reverend One' just as in the case of *Kuan Gong* (God of war) or *Toh Peh Gong* (great granduncle/local great saint/local god of soil) (Cheu, 1992, 1997). According to Sakai (1993), the name *Datok Gong* reflects the mixture of Chinese and local Malay belief, where *Datok* refers to the chief of a group. In the modern Malaysian context, the term *Datuk* is a title often associated with a great non-royal chief, where the term is conferred in recognition of outstanding service to the nation or a person with higher status (Sakai, 1993; Andaya & Andaya, 2001).

2.7. Datok Gong and Datok Keramat: Are They the Same?

The Chinese worship the *Keramat*s in the belief that spirit beings have the power to preserve peace, harmony, and safety not only in residential areas but also in places of work such as farms, timber camps, sawmills, factories, and construction sites (Cheu, 1997). Moreover, Choo (2007) explained the acceptance of *Keramat* by the Chinese in terms of the function of the deity. The author further elaborated that *Keramat* also helped the early Chinese immigrants adapt to their residence in the Malay world.

Tan (2015) explained that when humans migrate, religions follow; this is a psychological support to the migrants so that they will have a sense of belonging in a new residence. Furthermore, Tan (2015) explained that the religion brought by migrants may be transformed with local characteristics or the migrants may even adopt the religion of the majority people and even new faiths may be created. The question is whether *Datok Gong* and *Datok Keramat* are the same.

Cheu (1997) points out that the only distinction between *Datok Gong* and *Datok Keramat* is in terms of ritual organization such as the way of worship is different as he had provided a table of beliefs and practices in his work in 1997. In other words, Cheu believes that *Datok Gong* is equivalent to *Datok Keramat*.

Sakai (1993) explained that *Datok Gong* is sometimes linked to the local God of Soil (sometimes even known as god of luck and virtue, great granduncle,

or local great saint), which is also generally known as *Ta-po-kung* (or *Toh Peh Gong* in Hokkien dialect, and other name such as *Hou-t'u*, *Ti-chu*, *Fu-te-cheng-shen*) and they are worshipped together. Sakai (1993) even argued that the link between *Datok Gong*, the Malay folk deity, and the Chinese local god of soil, *Ta-po-kung*, is formed by ‘marriage’. Moreover, Sakai (1993) elaborated that *Datok Gong* is the Malay equivalent of the Chinese term *Ta-po-kung*, which shared the same view with Choo (2007) and See (2012).

See (2012) has a different view of *Datok Gong* and *Datok Keramat*. He views that the creation of *Datok Gong* is based on the Taoist logical system, making it Taoist. He used Choo’s explanation to support his argument. Thus, “*Datok Gong* in different locations can have different names, birthdays, and personality traits” (Choo, 2007, p. 5). See (2012) argued that the idea of the office is core to Taoism but not to *Keramat*. After all, See’s (2012) argument on *Datok Gong* as a Taoist is based on the worship of a deity, but he fails to point out that the origin of *Datok Gong* is not from *Keramat*.

To conclude, almost all scholars agree that the worship of a deity is different between *Keramat* and *Datok Gong*, but there is no strong argument to support the statement that *Datok Gong* is not from *Keramat*. This is due to the lack of study on *Keramat* and *Datok Gong* (Winstedt, 1924).

2.8. Iconography

Choo (2007) argued that Chinese worshipers believe that a picture or image of the deity, or a piece of paper or wood with the name of the deity written on it, hence, the soul, mind, and personality of the deity are present. The iconography of *Datok Gong* is commonly represented by a Malay man dressed in traditional Malay clothes in *sarong* and a *songkok* holding a *Kris* or other traditional Malay court regalia and ceremonial objects (Choo, 2007).

According to Cheu (1992), each of the colors symbolizes the function of each *Datok Gong*. He had listed out five *Datok Gongs* with different colours; green signifies the *Keramat* of the east, ensuring the growth of flora and fauna; red refers to the *Keramat* of the south, controlling drought, fire and harvest; white represents the *Keramat* of the west, controlling ill luck or inauspiciousness; black signifies the *Keramat* of the north, exercising control on water, flood and death; yellow refers to the *Keramat* of the center that keeps surveillance over the stability and general well-being of the respective colours. This iconography contradicts the six categories of *Keramat* beliefs by Winstedt (1924) and Osman (1989). These conflicts and contradictions lead to a weak foundation of these perceptions.

3. Methodology

This research focuses on how the *Datok Gong* worshipers perceive him in their daily lives. The targeted group was Malaysian *Datok Gong* worshipers aged 25. This specific group of people was chosen because researchers believed that the worshipers were

more articulate and critical of their views at this age. They informed in detail their perspectives on *Datok Gong* due to their wider social circle and experience. The type of sampling used in this research was purposive sampling.

Both primary and secondary data were used. The primary data were collected via the oral history method. In-depth interviews (open-ended questions) and observations were conducted at many locations in West and East Malaysia. The primary data was used as the main source of reference to ensure the accuracy of the information gained. However, secondary data such as books and journals were used to support the data and strengthen the analyses.

The locations were chosen based on the familiarity of the researchers from these areas. This enabled them to enter these communities and temples of *Datok Gong*. These locations are also occupied densely by Chinese ethnic groups who are also ardent worshipers of *Datok Gong*. Easy access to the researchers’ hometowns made this research possible as the confidentiality and trust from the respondents were ensured.

The similarity in spoken language was an advantage as the researchers fluently spoke the same dialect. Participant observation was adopted when the researchers were in the temples and involved in the rites of *Datok Gong*. This research was conducted in Bukit Mertajam, Chai Leng Park, Tanjung Malim, Ulu Bernam, Semenyih, Kuching, and Sibul. Bukit Mertajam and Chai Leng Park are in Penang, West Malaysia. Tanjung Malim, Ulu Bernam, and Semenyih are in Selangor, West Malaysia. Meanwhile, Kuching and Sibul are in Sarawak, East Malaysia. Bukit Mertajam, Chai Leng Park, Kuching and Sibul were selected because these are some locations where predominantly the Chinese ethnic groups worship *Datok Gong*. On the other hand, Tanjung Malim, Ulu Bernam, and Semenyih were selected because numerous *Datok Gong* temples can be found there. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2000), only 1.3% of the population in Malaysia are confessors of Confucianism, Taoism, and tribal/folk/other traditional Chinese religions. Thus, selective locations were the main criteria.

4. Data Analysis

Twelve respondents of different genders, age, occupation, and ethnicity were interviewed. Their breakdown is as follows: three respondents from Hulu Bernam, Selangor; one from Semenyih, Selangor; two from Tanjong Malim, Perak; three from Penang; three from Kuching and Sibul, Sarawak. The number of the respondents was limited as it was a challenging task to locate believers of *Datok Gong*.

4.1. Narratives of the Respondents

4.1.1. Respondents from Hulu Bernam, Selangor

Respondent 1 (R1): A 50-year-old Chinese housewife claimed to have an unusual ability to detect

the existence of spiritual beings. She recounted a supernatural meeting with the *White Datok Gong – Datok Putih* in the middle of the night. She worshiped *Datok Gong* for almost 25 years and stated, “He helped me a lot in many aspects of my life, I can feel his existence around my family, he keeps us safe and in harmony, and he is part of my family”.

Respondent 2 (R2): This is a 55-year-old Chinese businessman. He claimed to have worshiped *Datok Gong* since he opened his own grocery shop in 1988. He had a special offering ritual and feast of *Datok Gong* on his first day of business. He stressed that Chinese businessmen must venerate *Datok Gong* to confirm business success and for business guardianship. He provided a brief background about his *Datok Gong* placed in the facade of his shop, “This *Datok Gong* was revered in the 1970s during the construction of these shop lots by the Malay and Chinese construction workers to ensure safety”.

Respondent 3 (R3): This is a 50-year-old Chinese woman who worshiped eight different Sinicist deities in her house. She paid special attention to the daily rites on worshiping her *Datok Gong* because “My *Datok Gong* is a Malay *Datok*, so he must be venerated differently from the other Sinicist deities.” She also claimed that her *Datok Gong* is a food lover and demanding, “He only chooses to smoke branded cigarettes, specifically Lucky Strike costing almost RM 20 per pack”.

4.1.2. Respondents from Tanjong Malim, Perak

Respondent 4 (R4): This is a 25-year-old Chinese postman who worshiped *Datok Gong* since he was a child. Born in a middle-class family, he claimed, “Requesting health and wealth from *Datok Gong* is a common phenomenon for those who worship *Datok Gong*. Likewise, his parents did the same too.”

Respondent 5 (R5): This is a 35-year-old Indian who coincidentally adopted this belief five years ago. He believed, “It was fate meeting *Datok Gong*, who had saved my life once.” He also showed the researchers in detail how he worshiped *Datok Gong* with specific rites and rituals for every daily occasion.

4.1.3. Respondents from Semenyih, Selangor

Respondent 6 (R6): This is a 70-year-old Indian taxi driver, who recounted how Malays during his childhood worshiped *Datok Keramat* at the border between the jungle and his village as a form of control of the spirits in the woods to ensure the villagers’ safety. However, he compared those adoring years with the modern era, “Sekarang Melayu yang beli ToTo itu akan curi-curi pergi sembayang. Sembayang kat hutan dan kubur. Satu gang masuk hutan kat tengah malam, atau pergi kubur, mereka tak takut bah, yang itu kaki ToTo” (translated to mean “Nowadays, the Malays buying Toto numbers will pray secretly in jungles and graveyards. One gang goes to the jungle at midnight or graveyard; they are unafraid as they are Toto addicts”).

4.1.4. Respondents from Bukit Mertajam and Chai Leng Park, Seberang Perai, Penang

Respondent 7 (R7): A committee member of *Tong Leng Kong* and the founder of the *Bukit Mertajam* temple. He perceived that the relationship established between *Datok Gong* and the worshipers is fundamentally for guardianship. As such, he described the faith he had for *Datok Gong*, which led him to build a temple and work as its administrator. Besides, he believed that the supernatural power possessed by *Datok Gong* exists, which he had personally experienced.

Respondent 8 (R8): An 80-year-old Chinese, the grandfather of 20 grandchildren, and the head of a big family. All the family members worship *Datok Gong*, despite most of the family members having moved out; they gather during the birthday of *Datok Gong* to perform offering rituals. Among the members of the family, he is the only who much knows *Datok Gong*’s history. The family members only follow in his footsteps in worshiping without questioning the reason.

Respondent 9 (R9): This is a 51-year-old Chinese woman who built a shrine of *Datok Gong* outside her house for the good of her neighborhood, now everyone in the village can worship. She worships *Datok Gong* strictly only by offering Malay cuisine, especially traditional Malay food. Besides, she and her family experienced a supernatural encounter with *Datok Gong* during an occasion, which led them to venerate *Datok Gong*.

4.1.5. Respondents from Kuching and Sibul, Sarawak

Respondent 10 (R10): The administrator of *Tian Hou Gong* – a Chinese temple located at Attap Street, Kuching. He has been operating the temple for 15 years. He defined the reason for worshiping *Datok Gong* as a culture that needs to be reproduced as it presents an individual’s social and religious identity and is a moral indicator that guides an individual’s behavior.

Respondent 11 (R11): This is a 30-year-old Chinese, primary school teacher. She is also the secretary of *Datok Gong* temple at Sejingkat, Kuching. She described how *Datok Gong* had helped her out of life misery by guiding and advising her through dreams and various supernatural occurrences. Hence, she will celebrate *Datok Gong*’s birthday by offering ceremony and veneration rituals in the temple to respect and appreciate his help.

Respondent 12 (R12): This is a middle-aged Chinese man who sells Chinese religious goods. He explained that he worships *Datok Gong* due to the interaction between him and the spirit as a form of veneration that values his kindness. He perceived *Datok Gong* as a benevolent human being that acquires supernatural power to help people, thus, in return, people should value his kindness through offerings.

5. Results and Discussion

The information drawn from the respondents

highlights the following four relationships enjoyed by the worshipers: supernatural, socio-economic, daily routine, and symbolic. It is stated that the results of the study are limited to scores of geographical areas and the respondents.

5.1. Supernatural Relationship

It has been observed that all the respondents perceive *Datok Gong* as a living person who lived once upon a time and possessed supernatural power, thus, the supernatural power may array from healing an illness to giving luck and wealth (the respondents' feedback). The findings also show that the respondents perceived *Datok Gong* as a form of human being, which has a real figure and identity with names and honorifics, date of birth that can help them solve their problems. *Datok Gong* is also perceived as an ancestral spirit that helped their ancestors in adapting to the social environment in Malaya.

However, to the believers, there is nothing strange about their ideas, behaviors, and gestures in accordance with their belief. This was reported by most of the respondents, who perceived the supernatural power of *Datok Gong* as a common phenomenon and experienced the supernatural of *Datok Gong* through dreams and daily occurrences. To the worshipers, their experiences with the supernatural were common and normal, where they said it was not strange, and his presence was comforting and sometimes stress-reducing. The worshipers tended to imbed a sense of commonsense into what they experience, although the belief in omnipresence is difficult to understand, nevertheless perceiving it as part of their religious life.

Half of the respondents stated that they encountered supernatural experiences that enhanced their beliefs in *Datok Gong*. One of the respondents (R6) stated, "My village used to have what you called *Datok Gong*, but we just called him *Datok*. He is a Malay God. When I was a small kid, my friends and I used to sit in front of his temple and ate his offerings. Sometimes, we felt winds blowing on our faces and believed that he was there watching us".

Respondent (R11) could clearly remember how she had experienced the supernatural, "I had once worshiped *Datok Gong* temple beside my house before I worshiped *Datok Gong* here at Sejingkat Bridge. At that time, I always saw a white figure looking like a man with a red bandeau on his head, but I did not feel scared. One day, when I went to school, I nearly fell into a deep drain. However, I felt some forces pulled me backward, which helped me avoid that accident. Afterwards, I no longer see that white figure. I felt that he had protected me. Later, I dreamt of *Datok Gong*".

5.2. Socio-Economic Relationship

The existence of *Datok Gong* was also socio-economical in nature, which is in accordance with Cheu (1997) who states that Chinese religion is not simply a set of beliefs but is also an extensive network of ritual services, especially for the dead – of shops making and

retailing paperwork for funerals and other occasions, of mediumship, and of links to cultural associations. These served as a major economic basis for an individual's religious life. The findings show that respondents perceived *Datok Gong* as a form of human being, which has a real figure and identity with names and honorifics, date of birth that can help them solve their problems.

Most of the respondents had the idea of requesting wealth from *Datok Gong*, but the purpose varied. They obtained wealth from *Datok Gong* through gambling, lottery, and lucky draw – TOTO, DaiMaChai, Magnum, etc. From our fieldwork observation in *Datok Gong's* temple in Sejingkat Bridge, Kuching, the whole idea of *Datok Gong's* effectiveness is mostly on wealth obtaining, where the temple was full of four-digit numbers for gambling purposes for the worshipers to obtain wealth. However, this caused many to wish for more wealth as they perceive this is the only way to obtain a fast and large amount of money. This does reflect on their socio-economic relationship with *Datok Gong*.

According to R6, "They worshiped *Datok Gong* during midnight in the place where no people would go, for example, deeply in the jungle or even graveyard. The reason that they worship *Datok* is to get numbers for TOTO and Magnum. For those who are not buying TOTO and Magnum, they are praying for better luck in gambling. I had experienced it". Besides, respondents who have business are likely to enhance their faith in *Datok Gong*. One of the respondents (R3) stated, "One of the reasons that my family and I worshiped *Datok Gong* is to seek guardianship from him and help in the fortune of our business". Hence, it showed how economic aspects played a major role in constituting their religious relationship.

5.3. Daily Routine Relationship

According to Geertz, the crucial pillar in one's life is religion, which creates culture in society (Geertz in Lambek, 2002). This study shows that agents of socialization such as family and temple played an important role in shaping religious beliefs. Most respondents had been worshiping *Datok Gong* since they were children, and their family members were devotees of *Datok Gong*. Undoubtedly, family is the basic agent of socialization, where respondents learn to perceive *Datok Gong* for guardianship and the basic concept of rites and rituals. Respondent 2 mentioned, "My wife worships *Datok Gong* every day. She saw the other people worshipping him, and thus, she followed it. I also followed my wife although I ask nothing from *Datok Gong*."

The results also support Cheu's earlier findings in 1992 that the Chinese temple also played a role in enhancing their faith, where Chinese temples held different celebrations for different deities, including *Datok Gong*. Respondents confess having a sense of relatedness toward *Datok Gong* and perceive him as part of their family (R4, R5, R7, R8, and R9). Respondent 6 stated, "When I was a small kid, every

day I used to sit and talk with Datok. I feel he was exactly my grandfather, even though I have never seen him appear. But talking to him had become part of my everyday live.”

5.4. Symbolic Relationship

The study also supports Cheu (1997) that the symbol is greatly signified on how respondents worship *Datok Gong*, which enhances their faith. The symbolic relationship denotes how devotees recognize and understand the ways to worship *Datok Gong*. Hence, the belief itself was predominantly a symbolic way of presenting one's identity. The interaction between the devotees and *Datok Gong* was highly imbedded by norms that act as a prescription for the devotees' behavior and thoughts. These norms on how to worship *Datok Gong* contribute to systems of symbols including food and material culture linking devotees to *Datok Gong*.

For example, Tong Leng Kong temple in Penang puts up a notice listing down the food for worshipping, the ways to worship, such as how many joss sticks needed to be used for *Datok Gong* and the taboos. Different colored *Datok Gong* will have different-color candles and several joss sticks. Thus, the devotees perceive every *Datok Gong* differently, which constitutes a complex and symbolic belief system. All the respondents have their own way of worshipping *Datok Gong*. However, the rituals were not the same across different respondents, but the fundamental idea was the same, especially the taboos and norms.

Respondent 9 elaborates on the ways to worship and taboos. She uses joss sticks and candles for everyday worship but not joss paper. She does not worship *Datok Gong* with non-halal food. She will ensure her family does not eat non-halal food one day before they celebrate *Datok Gong's* birthday. All the utensils utilized to cook the food offerings for *Datok Gong* must be new or halal.

5.5. Two Approaches to Needs

5.5.1. The Sacred and Profane

According to Durkheim (1965), all religious beliefs classify notions into two opposite classes: profane and sacred. This study explains the above idea in the way a devotee associates with their religious and public spheres of life. The sacred and the profane are the crucial parts to understand the relationship expressed by the worshiper on the circled bond of demand and votive. For them, beliefs, myths, and spirits represent the sacred, and power, virtues, and histories are attributed to the sacred and their relationship with each other and the profane in the world. This supports Durkheim (1965), who also found that an object such as a rock, tree, or house can be imbued with sacred meanings and virtues. Rites and beliefs must have these sacred characters, as Durkheim (1965) distinguishes religious phenomena under two categories: beliefs and rites. Rites are modes of actions, such as how *Datok*

Gong worshipers use offerings in rituals to represent their faith; beliefs consist of opinions and representations, such as the thought of the devotee in demanding something from *Datok Gong*, which they believe will be fulfilled.

This study supports Durkheim (1965) that the relationship between a person and their Gods is mutual where sacredness in the idea of worshipping *Datok Gong* contributed to a continuous and circulated long-term relationship where nothing can intervene or break the bond between the devotees and *Datok Gong*. Hence, there is a degree of dependency fused with faith and rituals between a person and their *Datok Gong*. Devotees depend on *Datok Gong* to fulfill their request, but *Datok Gong* also depends on the devotee to provide offerings and rituals to complete the request. Hence, this relationship formed the sense of sacredness, which distinguished the other profane relationship a devotee has. A devotee cannot break up the relationship sacred between them and *Datok Gong*.

The observations also show that fulfillment is followed by a request claimed by four of the respondents interviewed. Meanwhile, the other respondents claimed that no matter if there is no demand or fulfillment, the offering as gratitude must be provided based on guardianship. “Who knows when he will fulfill your request as no one can foresee their misfortune,” one of the respondents claimed. Hence, there exists a sacred unbreakable relationship.

5.5.2. Desires and Needs

Keeping in mind the idea of the demand and votive, there is a need to understand and distinguish what is a desire and a need in the devotee's context. In the context of this study, a need is what a devotee lacks; however, a desire is what a devotee wishes for, but they may not lack it. Hence, desires and needs are crucial in understanding the existence of religious relationships. However, the findings from analyzing the respondents' ideas on such a basis provided us with new insight. Most respondents requested health and security from *Datok Gong*, but that does not mean that they lacked health and security. The underlined motive here is that most of them felt insecure about their life and doubted the unforeseen future; for instance, one of the respondents claimed, “I do not know what is going to happen to me tomorrow, I better pray first before that happens.” Thus, it shows the need for life security as a fundamental human need in society. However, desire is another realm of request from devotees. When there is a desire, there must be a continuous faith in what a particular devotee holds to come true. However, the votive may not be presented if there is no fulfillment from *Datok Gong*. Hence, what does a devotee demand from *Datok Gong*? According to 50% of the respondents, they desired wealth. In their context, wealth is the fundamental pragmatic concept of acquiring other basic human needs, such as food, health, and shelter. One of the respondents stated, “When I have enough money in my pocket, I can have

almost everything in society, especially for healthcare and food”.

In a nutshell, this study shows a continuous vote in fulfilling needs rather than desires. This differentiates the relationship between devotees and *Datok Gong* on the mutual basis of request. However, the notions of desires and needs are interrelated with the religious experience discussed, especially on socio-economic aspects that may reflect our current Malaysian economic condition and its effect on the other aspects of life.

Durkheim's (1965) views on two contrasting theories on religion exist: believers argue that their religion exists because spiritual entities exist; for example, *Datok Gong*, while skeptics argue that religion is just a human illusion. According to Firth (1996), religion is complex, it cannot be understood only as society's response to divine revelation, nor can it be understood as a mistaken perception of skeptics. Religion demonstrates a variety of beliefs, degrees of beliefs, kinds of ritual procedures, spiritual concepts, and symbolic imagery (Firth, 1996). More importantly, for anthropologists, religion is directly related to the social, economic, and political structures of the communities that practice the religion. Hence, it is crucial to analyze how societies perceived and venerated *Datok Gong* in accordance with these points of view.

6. Conclusions

The researchers were successful in relating interpretations of beliefs in the form of various relationships between *Datok Gong* and the worshippers. Moreover, the factors contributing to the faith in *Datok Gong* were unearthed and worshippers' perceptions in relation to daily life experiences. The extent of relationships includes supernatural, socioeconomic, daily-life, and symbolic relationships. It was also found that many factors directly contributed to these relationships, such as needs, desires, wishes, anthropology, sociology, humanistic, and psychology.

The findings show that most respondents perceived *Datok Gong* as a human being with a real figure, identity, names, honors, and date of birth, who can help them solve their problems. The findings also show that most respondents have been worshiping *Datok Gong* since childhood as their family members were devotees of *Datok Gong*.

The symbolic relationship denotes how devotees recognize and understand the ways to worship *Datok Gong*. Hence, the belief itself was predominantly a symbolic way of presenting one's identity due to the factors comprising the sacred and profane, desires and needs, anthropology and sociology, and humanistic and psychological dimensions.

This whole concept of beliefs was a totally contradictory aspect of studying *Datok Gong*, where Sinicism itself is a form of belief systems that mostly dominate in Chinese society in Malaysia. Previous scholars also noted how the localization of religion can

help in the socialization of different communities, but neglected the fact that the interaction of cultures is one of the reasons why localization could occur in the first place. From the findings, the worship of *Datok Gong* spirit meets basic human needs. The social environment of the devotees was not clearly evaluated in the previous research in accordance with their beliefs. This paper presented that devotees' social environment was one of the main aspects that shaped how they perceive *Datok Gong*, and thus formed a diverse and multidimensional relationship.

The veneration of *Datok Gong* is fundamentally pragmatic and eminently social and serves as a multidimensional relationship between devotees and deities in relation to their religious experience and identity. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that *Datok Gong* spiritualism may benefit more as a different form of psychotherapy that instills better coping strategies in everyday challenges. The promotion of positive coping strategies is developed and adapted from the impact of this spiritualism as a cognitive manifestation. The values and norms *Datok Gong* worshippers hold are often in the forefront, having a great influence on their life strategies and being stress reducers. *Datok Gong* belief acts as a psychotherapy that affects negative cognitive assumptions (belief of being abandoned by God, etc.) and gives believers the opportunity to deal with their struggles through alternative spiritual guidance. Thus, researchers should strive to obtain skills in understanding different spiritual aspects, whereby an attitude of religious/spiritual openness could result in individualized therapeutic objectives and methods adjusted to personal beliefs.

Finally, the study explored the extent of relationships, including supernatural, socioeconomic, daily-life, and symbolic relationships. It was also found that many factors directly contributed to these relationships, such as needs, desires, wishes, anthropology, sociology, humanistic, and psychology.

The novelty of the academic contribution of this study on *Datok Gong* is examining different types of relationships in this divine belief. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of spiritual relationships, but this study found multiple dimensions of worshippers' daily life that circled in this belief system. The daily life of the worshippers encompassed the importance of socioeconomic achievements that symbolically related to their divine loyalty to *Datok Gong*. The worshippers believed that *Datok Gong* contributed to their socioeconomic advancement, which could only be achieved if they had a symbolic relationship with him. They respected and worshiped *Datok Gong* in ways that would please the spirit, which then blessed them with abundance of fortune, good health and luck. Their needs and desires were encompassed in a psychotherapeutic coping strategy in facing the challenges of the 21st century.

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