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Symbolic Interactions in Traditional Medicine Practice

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Abstract

This study aims to explain the symbolic interaction in traditional medicine of the Sungai Guntung community. The traditional treatment in question is the administration of salt acid. Giving salt acid from the patient to the shaman is still preserved and believed by the community as the key to treatment. The theory used to analyse is Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism. This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The determination of informants was carried out by the purposive sampling technique or method. Based on the results of this study, the Sungai Guntung Village community still practises traditional medicine. This research resulted in the finding that the administration of salt acid is a spiritual phenomenon where the illness comes from physical, psychological, and magical sources. The meaning of tradition depends on social interaction, so the continuity of meaning is also very dependent on changes in social interaction. The symbolic interaction in this treatment is reflected in the symbol of bonding between the shaman and the patient, the symbol of the patient's trust in the shaman, the symbol of gratitude from the patient to the shaman, the symbol of the key to treatment, and the symbol of the belief that illness and treatment are spiritual phenomena.

Introduction

The concepts of tradition and culture are often mixed. Traditions are material objects, ideas, and intangible heritage that originate from the past and remain sustainable. They have not been destroyed, damaged, forgotten, or thrown away until now. So, tradition is a legacy of the past (Sztompka 2004). Meanwhile, culture is more complete, namely the unity of habits, beliefs, knowledge, morals, arts, laws, and customs obtained from members of society. (Taylor 1992). The Indonesian nation also has traditions and culture like other nations. Uniquely, Indonesia has a diversity of cultures, religions, beliefs, and ethnic groups.

Various types of traditions and culture exist throughout the region, including those in the Guntung River area of Tagaraja Village, Indragiri Hilir Regency, Riau Province. Riau is thick with Malay culture and Islamic teachings, so it is not surprising that the various traditions and cultures in Riau originate from the Malay tribe. This reciprocal acculturation (cultural fusion) between Islam and culture suggests that Islam is quite influential in shaping society's culture (Wardana, et al. 2023). Malay society upholds ritual traditions that the community must carry out to avoid problems or disasters. The ritual traditions of the Malay community include building a new house, the wedding ritual, the salt and acid ritual, and the rice field ritual.

The people of Sungai Guntung Village are Malay people. The tradition of using salt acid in traditional medicine remains sustainable, even though Indragiri Hilir Regency has three government hospitals, 31 community health centers, and a total of 34 to 42 specialist doctors (Amendments to the RPJMD of Indragiri Hilir Regency 2018－2023, 2018). But the people of Sungai Guntung still maintain the tradition of seeking treatment from shamans, and some even do it, side by side treatment (traditional and medical). Even though biomedical doctoral practices are increasingly developing and health service centers are beginning to spread, both managed by the government and the private sector, traditional medicine still exists. This proves that health is not only a

medical phenomenon but also a sociocultural phenomenon. The Indonesian people's medical system, which has existed for hundreds of years, is called the traditional medical system.

Traditional medicine is still very popular among the people of Sungai Guntung; they believe it represents their local wisdom, which every region that still believes in it holds dear. In traditional medicine with a shaman (in the Big Indonesian Dictionary, shaman means a person who heals, casts spells, and helps sick people), the patient goes through a process starting from the beginning, namely through examination, until healing usually takes 3—4 days (depending on the condition of the disease). If the patient is declared cured, then the final process/closure of a series of treatments, or what the Sungai Guntung community often calls drug locking. Locking medicine uses acid and salt as symbols given to shamans or arks.

People trust shamans because society has internalized the understanding that shamans are helpers. (Abidin in Karmila 2017). In this tradition, there is no coercion, meaning that shamans or healers do not oblige patients to participate. However, it is based on the initiative and trust of the community itself. The community believes this tradition originates from the ancestors of the Malay community, who still believe in spirits and objects like statues, trees, and stones, which are considered to have power. This is as stated in Suwardi's opinion in Karmila (2017), which suggests that the history of Malay society believes in animism and dynamism. Malays recognize the existence of forces beyond human control. Symbols of power and strength can take the form of trees, stones, and spirits.

Preserving traditions for the Malay people is a necessity because they cannot let go of their identity, even though most have shown changes towards modernity (T. F. F. Situmorang 2019). This change occurred due to the mixing of cultures with immigrant communities (Elsera 2022). Research by Desti (2022) explains that visiting graves holds meaning as a form of respect for ancestors, increases community solidarity, and strengthens existing societal values , such as religious values and the value of peace. The tradition of visiting graves uses media such as yellow *pulut*, red eggs, and yellow rice. Research on local traditions suggests that people believe in these sacred objects because their ancestors left them. This belief is mandatory for society because it has been passed down from parents for a long time, making it challenging to eradicate beliefs of the Malay community in Air Glubi Village, Bintan Pesisir District (Rahmawati & Elsera, 2023; Mardiana 2022). This belief manifests as a new *kenduri pompong* tradition for fishermen. The continued existence of this belief is influenced by historical stories, past tragedies, and the advice of their parents.

Guntung River is not a city, but its strategic geographic location makes the Riau Islands a key part of the busiest trade route in the world, the Strait of Malacca. Economic activity on the Guntung River is relatively dense, particularly in the coconut plantation sector. This growth is supported by the expansion of companies in the area, creating job opportunities. Consequently, various ethnic groups, races, and religions, apart from the Malay community, are also found on the Guntung River. Although along with developments, the Guntung River has grown into a very heterogeneous area. In terms of culture, the Guntung River is closely tied to Malay culture, exemplified by the tradition of giving acid and salt, which is still maintained and carried out by the people of the Guntung River to this day. There are historical meanings and values contained in the tradition of giving acid and salt, which people still trust and believe in to day. Previous research conducted by Elsera & Normayani (2023) shows that people still practice traditional medicine. This traditional medicine is believed to cure all kinds of

diseases if the process follows all the rules of treatment. People think that this procession contains values, and they feel health will improve and disease will not return. The previous research above has not analyzed the social interactions of local communities regarding traditional medicine. In this article, the continuity of the meaning of conventional medicine is shown to be highly dependent on changes in social interactions, where, over time, the tradition of giving acid and salt can change in meaning.

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative method with a descriptive type. Research aims to holistically understand the phenomena, actions, motivations, behavior, and perceptions experienced by research subjects. Describe it descriptively in the form of words and language, and utilize various natural methods (Moleong 2018). Meanwhile, the research location is the Guntung River, Tagaraja Village, Indragiri Hilir Regency. Determination of informants is carried out using techniques, such as purposive sampling, which selects informants based on specific criteria. The informants in this research are the Guntung River community, traditional leaders, shamans and healers, and both those who currently practice and those who do not practice this tradition.

The data collection techniques used in this research are direct observation techniques and in−depth interviews. Interviews were conducted to collect data by facilitating direct questions and answers between researchers and selected informants, using previously created interview guidelines. After obtaining data on the tradition of using acid and salt in traditional medicine, the researcher conducted data analysis to enhance understanding. The researcher made several efforts, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion.

Herbert Blumer's Theory of Symbolic Interactionism

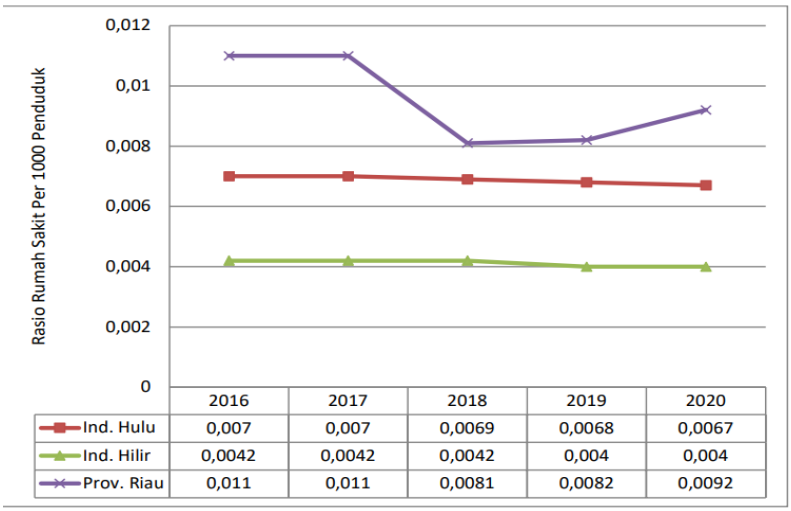
The theory of symbolic interactionism was first formulated by George Herbert Mead, a social philosopher, in his book entitled Mind, Self, and Society. However, Herbert Blumer is the figure who popularized the term symbolic interactionism. The fundamental characteristic of this theory is the natural relationship between humans in society and how culture and individuals develop through the symbols they create. Blume (Ritzer & Goodman 2011) symbolic interactionism rests on three premises: (1) Humans act based on the meaning given by various things that exist for them, (2) The meaning of various things comes from or arises from human social interactions with other people. (3) These meanings are modified through an interpretation process, and then these meanings are refined during the social interaction process. Interrelated patterns of action and interaction will form groups and communities.

According to Blumer, the term symbolic interaction refers to the specifics of interactions between humans. The characteristic is that people interpret and define each other's behavior. This is not simply a reaction to one person's behavior towards another person. People's reactions do not occur directly in response to other people's actions; instead, they happen based on the "meaning" given to those actions. Interaction between individuals, through the use and interpretation of symbols, or through joint efforts to understand the meaning of each other's actions. Therefore, human interaction is not a process in which a stimulus automatically and immediately causes a response. However, between the stimulus received and the response, the actor interprets the process. This interpretation process is a thinking process which is a human ability (Ritzer & Goodman 2011. This theory is used in this research to analyze the meaning of society or the administration of salt and acid in treatment. Through this theory, we can

explore how the meaning of salt and acid in traditional medicine is not formed solely through the provision of stimuli but rather through human interpretation.

Indragiri Hilir Regency is not an area where the community cannot access health care. It is proven that the Indragiri Hilir Regency government has provided three government hospitals accessible to the public through both BPJS and general routes. The data on the ideal capacity ratio for the three hospitals is 1000: 1 bed or the equivalent of 655 beds for 654,909 people. The development of hospital ratios can be seen in the picture below:

Figure1. Development of Hospital Ratio per 1000 Population of Indragiri Hilir Regency, Indragiri Hulu and Riau Province



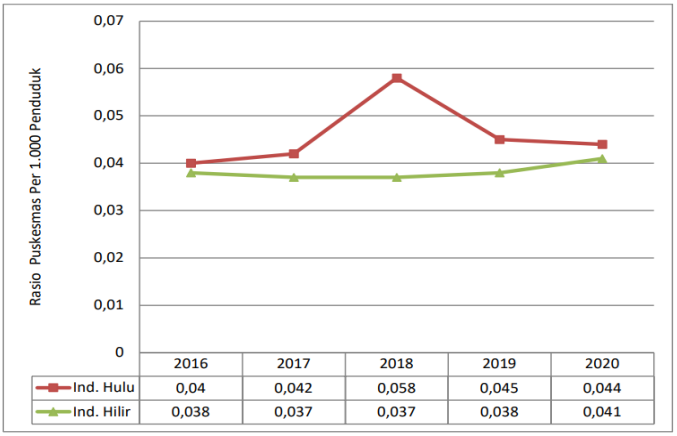
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Ind. Hulu	0,007	0,007	0,0069	0,0068	0,0067
Ind. Hilir	0,0042	0,0042	0,0042	0,004	0,004
Prov. Riau	0,011	0,011	0,0081	0,0082	0,0092

Source: https://indragirihilirkab.sipd.kemendagri.go.id

The data above shows that three hospitals support modern medicine in Indragiri Hilir, making them a popular choice for people seeking treatment. However, in fact, the availability of hospitals has not been able to eliminate people's trust in seeking treatment from shamans. Some people still believe that the disease can be treated through traditional medicine. Apart from hospitals, Indragiri Hilir Regency also has a community health center. There are 31 more health centers than sub－districts (20 sub－districts). As for the ratio of Indragiri downstream health centers, it is 0.038 － 0.041 per 1,000 population, meaning that each health center serves 38 － 41 residents per center. The ratio of community health centers can be seen in the following figure:

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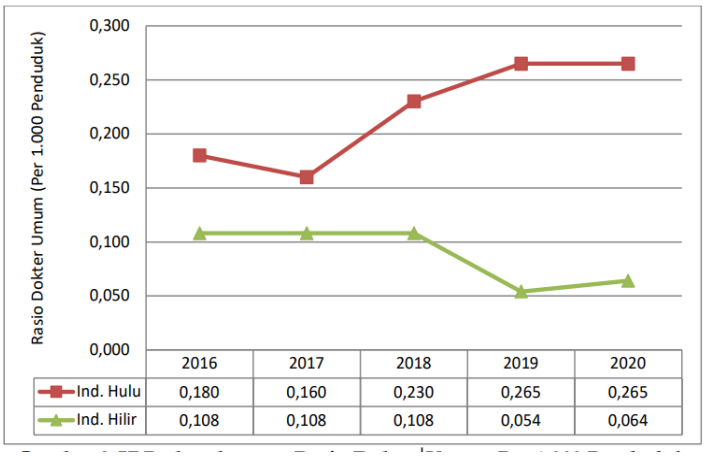
Figure 2. Development of Community Health Center Ratio per 1,000 Population of Indragiri Hilir and Indragiri Hulu Regency 2016 – 2020



Source: https://indragirihilirkab.sipd.kemendagri.go.id

Modern medical facilities in Indragiri Hilir are not only hospitals, but also community health centers have been established in every sub – district. Even so, the availability of modern medical facilities has not been able to eliminate the trust of some people in seeking treatment from shamans. A total of 3 hospitals and 34 to 41 health centers are available in Indragiri Hilir Regency. Meanwhile, the availability of specialist doctors in Indragiri Hilir Regency is 34 – 42 people. The development ratio of specialist doctors and general practitioners can be seen in the following picture:

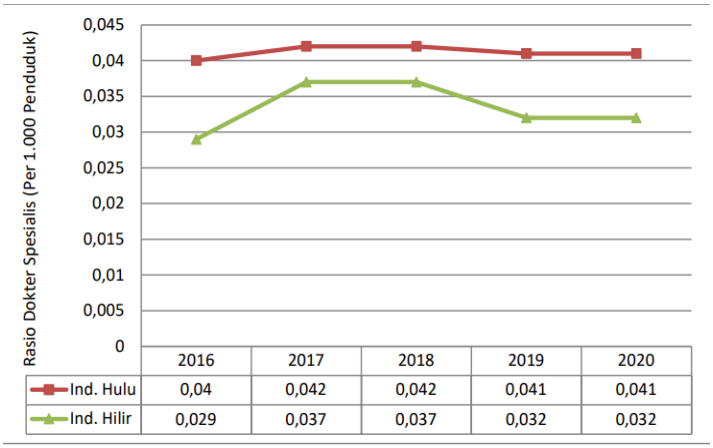
Figure 3. Development of the Ratio of General Practitioners Per 1,000 Population of Indragiri Hilir Regency 2016 – 2020



Source: https://indragirihilirkab.sipd.kemendagri.go.id

The data above shows that the availability of general practitioners is less than in Indragiri Hulu Regency, but it still reaches 292 doctors. Meanwhile, specialist data can be seen in the image below:

Figure 4. Development of the Ratio of Specialist Doctors Per 1,000 Population of Indragiri Hilir Regency 2016 – 2020



Source: https://indragirihilirkab.sipd.kemendagri.go.id

Based on the two pictures above (figures 3 and 4), it can be concluded that the government is making efforts to encourage the use of modern medicine by all district residents. Therefore, the addition and recruitment of general practitioners and specialists is being carried out. However, the presence of a medical team has not been able to eliminate people's trust in seeking traditional medicine from shamans.

Conserving Symbolic Interaction: Tradition of Giving Acid and Salt in Medicine

The tradition of acid and salt in traditional medicine is still maintained by the Guntung River community, not without reason. This is due to the interpretation, translation, and definition of their behavior, which originates from social interactions. In short, choosing to preserve traditional medicine by administering acid and salt is not just about eliciting a reaction from others but also about deriving meaning from the action. Johnson (1990) mentioned that People's reactions are not based directly on other people's actions, but on the meaning they give to them. Traditional medicine is still accepted among the Liliweri people, who believe that the conventional system of medicine is respected because it originates from the ancestors or is based on beliefs passed down through natural ingredients and non – medical healing powers (Jufriyandi Mokodompit et al. 2022).

The hereditary beliefs referred to by Liliweri are in line with Blumer's view in Johnson (1990) that they are formed as a result of very long, lengthy, and intimate social interactions. The process of preserving this tradition and culture involves using symbols, interpretations, and a mutual understanding of the meaning of actions. In this research, the Guntung River community understands and believes that their actions in trusting traditional medicine by providing acid and salt as a final treatment reflect their interpretation of a disease that requires both medical and non – medical treatment.

The non – medical treatment taken by the Guntung River community has become a spiritual phenomenon, with beliefs that some illnesses originate from physical, psychological, and magical causes. Therefore, people trust shamans to treat diseases that cannot be cured by medicine. Based on an interview with Atan Acik, a shaman in Sungai Guntung, it was noted that most patients come with complaints of fever, pain caused by caterpillars, and reprimands. Sometimes, people seek the shaman's help for issues like running or subduing someone. For the Guntung River community, the above types of disease cannot be treated by doctors, so they must seek alternative treatment from traditional healers. Even though some people have tried to go to a doctor before,

they have not been able to recover and have been able to get healing by going to a shaman.

Giving acid and salt is done because people believe that this object means that their treatment with the shaman has ended and healing has been obtained. This symbol of acid and salt cannot be exchanged for other items because the shaman has internalized to the public that the key to treatment is in the form of acid and salt, which the patient hands over to the shaman. Substituting acid and salt for shamans is an absolute must for both local communities and immigrant communities. This is as expressed by Mr. Atan Ali, "It cannot be (replaced), acid and salt have become a custom for our people, when people use a thousand duets, the important thing is acid and salt".

Some people actually give acid and salt at the beginning of treatment, although generally, this is done at the end of treatment. For patients who are given salt during the treatment period, the aim of providing salt is usually so that the patient does not forget this, as stated by Hamdan and Baharudin as follows: "It's up to us, whether we provide it after treatment or whether we provide it after treatment. "Only if it's near this mountain, people usually give it acid and salt after they have finished treatment," said Hamdan. In line with Hamdan, Baharudin also expressed the same thing, "We can sleep when we ask for medicine, we can also deliver it after we finish treatment, if we miss it when we ask for medicine, so we don't forget. "Most people here take them off for treatment" (Interview 2021)

The same interpretation shared by the Guntung River community and shamans has resulted in this tradition being preserved. The patient's recovery after treatment, concluded with the administration of acid and salt, is a stimulus that is not obtained automatically but is a process involving responses that arise. This interpretation process is a thinking process. This thought process occurs naturally between humans in society. This is in line with thinking Blumer (Ritzer & Goodman 2011) states that symbolic interactionism rests on three premises: (1) Humans act based on the meaning given by various things that exist for them, (2) The meaning of various things comes from or arises from human social interactions with others (3) These meanings are modified through an interpretation process, then these meanings are refined during the social interaction process. Interrelated patterns of action and interaction will form groups and communities.

People in ancient times said that salt acid was a medicine hardener (strengthening the efficacy of medicine). People believe that if they don't provide acid and salt, then the medicine given by the shaman/physician will be tasteless. Bland, what this tradition means is that it is not practical or efficacious. The meaning of giving acid and salt is likened to strength in carrying out treatment. If you give salt to a shaman, it means that the patient is entrusting treatment to the shaman's knowledge. The salt acid method will be a strength for shamans in treating patients. The more salt you taste, the stronger the shaman's power will be. This was stated by informant Atan Ali, "Acid and salt do have a meaning, that's the term for salt. If you see ketchup, you'll know it later, and the knowledge will be much stronger. Like salt, you can use as much as you want after that knowledge. If you laugh, you can add salt if you cook. I don't know what salt is like in my cooking, of course, I'm a slave, so acid and salt are like the power of our knowledge."

From the presentation given by Mr. Atan Ali, it is understood that salt tastes salty when it is tasted, just as it is known to those who taste salt. The more they taste salt, the stronger the knowledge of those who taste it. The purpose of this tamarind salt is that when mixed with salt, the sour tamarind loses its tart taste, creating a delicious

combination of flavors between the tamarind and the salt. Still, when the tamarind is mixed with water, it will lose its sour taste, but if the tamarind is mixed with salt, it has a tart taste and a salty taste. Between knowledge, intellect, and thought, there is also a key element. Informant Hamdan, a traditional leader, conveyed another opinion: the meaning of giving acid and salt comes from the philosophy that disease originates from the sea. Usually, people who are sick state that they went somewhere and became ill after returning. So, treating with acid and salt is like uniting land and sea, a symbol of peace.

> "*Acid and salt are proof that land and sea have made peace. Acid is used because it has the highest value. This acid has many medicinal uses, derived from the leaves, fruit, and roots. It is useful for medicine or is multifunctional. Because these two objects, namely acid and salt, are multifunctional, people in ancient times concluded that they can calm the lives of living creatures. The sea everywhere is salty and acidic. "In ancient times, people worshiped objects that had many uses because they were thought to be able to help them in all aspects of life*," (Interview 2021)

If you use Blumer's view, the belief that salt acid is a strengthening drug is not merely a person's reaction to others' behavior; rather, it is a process of interpreting and defining each other's behavior. Indeed, Blumer believes that people's reactions do not occur directly to other people's actions, but rather occur based on the "meaning" attributed to those actions. However, internalizing this meaning requires an interpretation process until it can be accepted as a unified meaning in society.

Because the meaning of traditions depends on social interaction, the continuity of that meaning also depends significantly on changes in social interaction. Over time, the meaning of the tradition of giving acid and salt can change. Situations during social interactions contribute to changes in meaning. If the initial tradition of providing acid and salt by the Guntung River community was initially interpreted as locking in medicine, then over time, the meaning of this tradition can be modified through an interpretive process or evolving views. So, this interpretation will create other meanings in the future.

The meanings modified through the interpretive process are interrelated with the provision of acid and salt. So, if at the beginning, giving salt and acid is a symbol of the end of treatment, then with social interaction, the meaning can change to become a symbol of thanks. In the community, if someone has delivered acid, it means they have shown gratitude to the one who helped them without directly saying thank you. Through this act, acid is considered a form of prayer from the patient. This can be linked to the ritual of salt and acid, where acid and salt are read with a prayer or incantation addressed to the Almighty. With the Almighty's permission, the person can be healed through the intermediary of a shaman/physician. The more salt the shaman/healer obtains, the more people will pray to the healer/shaman, and the stronger the knowledge of the shaman/healer will be.

Another interpretation of giving acid is as a symbol of bonding between the shaman and his patient. This bond is built from the social interaction between the shaman and the community, as well as the social construction within the community. In reality, acid and salt are just a symbol that reflects the patient's trust and gratitude to the shaman after carrying out treatment. Blumer in (Johnson 1990) states that humans will not act if it is not based on the meaning they believe in. Meanwhile, the trustworthiness of this symbol must go through social interaction. This symbolic change in giving acid and salt is not an automatic stimulus process and immediately causes a response. The process of interpreting salt and pepper as a symbol of gratitude is of course, a thinking process which is a human ability (Ritzer & Goodman 2011)

Another reason the Guntung River community still believes in using acid and salt for traditional treatment is the success and failure of treatments in previous communities. The people of Sungai Guntung, who still believe in conventional medicine, observe and analyze the behavior of patients receiving treatment from shamans. Many of them were successfully cured after seeking treatment from a shaman, and their illness did not recur after administering acid and salt as the final requirement of the treatment. Informant Atan Ali, a resident of Sungai Guntung, expressed this:

> *For example, if you don't use that acid and salt, you will repeat it over and over again. The purpose of this salt is to make it sour. How does this salt taste sour, and why does the sour taste disappear when mixed with other salt? Maybe there is a taste of sweetness between the acid and the salt. If the acid is mixed with water, the sour taste is lost, but if the sour is mixed with salt, it remains sour. There is a taste of salt. Between the knowledge of will and thinking there is also the key* (Interview 2021)

Atan Ali's statement is similar to the statement of informant Cik Atan, a shaman in the Guntung River. There has been an incident where someone who didn't lock it had the same disease as the same disease, but it's never happened before that person died. Informant Amnah's belief in giving acid and salt was to prevent the disease from recurring when she helped take her nephew for treatment to a shaman. The child has a non—medical illness. His nephew keeps crying and can't stay away from his mother. The child forbade his mother from praying, was not allowed to wear a headscarf, and often cried and wailed at night. At that time, the family and the shaman believed that this child was being disturbed by demons/jinn. After treatment, the child recovered. However, because he forgot to give him acid and salt, it wasn't long before the child relapsed. Finally, treatment was carried out from the start.

Some people also admit that they believe that patients who relapse and even become more serious are patients who do not give acid to the shaman after completing treatment. According to the informant, patients who failed to recover from their illness after seeking treatment from a shaman generally had a history of non—medical illness. In ethnomedicine, the terms healthy and sick are known to refer not only to a person's physical condition but also to non—physical conditions. Beliefs, values, and social and cultural factors play an essential role in defining health conditions. (Herlan et al. 2020) Human behavior in dealing with health problems is not random behavior, but selective, planned and structured behavior within a health service system which is an integral part of the culture of the community concerned. This selective behavior is a sociocultural adaptive strategy that emerged in response to the threat of disease.

The medical and traditional treatment carried out by the Guntung River community is part of the medical system, which is an element of a nation's knowledge system. This system, in its realization, can be included in the technological element. The diversity of ethnicities and cultures has consequences for the diversity of medical systems (traditional and modern) in society. The medical system is a universal element of a culture, so it is an integral part of culture. Therefore, each medical system has a different concept of health and illness, as well as treatment efforts. There are classifications of causes of disease that are considered to originate from naturalistic systems (natural forces, individual imbalances, not regarding certain people) or personalistic (intervention from an agent, whether supernatural or human).

The tradition of using acid and salt in traditional medicine, as believed by the Guntung River community, involves taboos, meaning specific actions must not be taken to ensure the treatment is successful and the disease does not recur. The abstinence is in the form of a prohibition so that the giver of salt acid, who is a shaman's patient,

does not eat the salt acid. It is feared that this will cause the patient's disease to recur. Tok Atan Cik, a shaman, expressed this:

> *It's taboo, yes, if you've already filled the salted acid, the salted acid that you read earlier won't boil again until the person who brought it eats the salted acid. Make Nye say, if the salt and pepper shared by the person are separate from the salt and pepper I bought myself, what else is there to serve to the guests? I told my son to cook using the salt and pepper I bought; if the salt and pepper were shared by someone else, I would only use them for my family. Die back again.*

Conclusion

This study found that there was a symbolic interaction in giving salt acid at the end of traditional treatment. Patients who a shaman has successfully cured are required to administer acid and salt so that the disease does not recur. The forms of symbolic interaction in administering acid and salt in treatment are as follows: first, the symbol of a shaman's bond with his patient can be observed. This bond is built from the social interaction between the shaman and the community, as well as the social construction within the community. Second, a symbol of the patient's trust in the shaman who has tried to cure him. Third, the emblem of giving acid and salt is a form of gratitude from the patient to the shaman after treatment. Fourth, a symbol is needed to ensure the treatment carried out is not in vain, so it must be locked. Fifth, it becomes a symbol of the belief that disease and treatment are spiritual phenomena. Because disease does not only come from the physical/body, treatment should not only be centered on the body but also carried out psychologically and magically. As for the meaning of traditions depending on social interaction, the continuity of that meaning also depends significantly on changes in social interaction. Over time, the meaning of the tradition of giving acid and salt can change. The administration of salt acid in treatment is a thoughtful and interpretive process, involving selective, planned, and structured behavior within a health service system that is an integral part of the community's culture.

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