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### SUKU AS SELF-REPRESENTATION FOR THE ADAT PERPATIH COMMUNITY IN NEGERI SEMBILAN, MALAYSIA

AW Radzuan

Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage Universiti Malaysia Kelantan Malaysia

E-mail: [ainul@umk.edu.my](mailto:ainul@umk.edu.my)

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This article considers the importance of suku (clan) for the adat perpatih community in Negeri Sembilan. Generally, Malays in Negeri Sembilan practise adat perpatih as part of their customary law, with suku being one of the fundamental principles with which its contemporary members identify. Without suku, adat perpatih could not continue to exist. However, suku has increasingly been practised less by adat perpatih community members due to their preferences changing over time. Accordingly, this study examined the importance of suku for members of the adat perpatih community in Negeri Sembilan, especially the impact of suku on their life. Twelve research participants participated in the study, which involved in-depth interviews and participant observations. This revealed 12 different suku divisions, with the practice of suku generally found to enable recognition of community, the representation of identity, a sense of belonging, and an act of protection and security.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Adat perpatih is considered part of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of Malaysia. As one of the customary laws in the country (apart of adat temenggong, which favours the father's side), adat perpatih is practised by the Malays of Negeri Sembilan. The literature generally indicates that adat perpatih originated in West Sumatra, Indonesia, and was brought to the Malay lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Minangkabau immigrants (Abdul Khalid, 1992; Mohamed Ibrahim, 1968; Peletz, 1988; Tan-Wong, 1992). However, adat perpatih has also been recognised as a mix between the existing adat (customs) of the Orang Asli in Negeri Sembilan and the adat which arrived with the Minangkabau (Peletz, 1988). Despite arguments surrounding its origin, adat

perpatih has continued to significantly influence the life of the adat perpatih community, especially the Malays.

Besides that, countless researches have also been conducted on the notion of adat perpatih. For example, Idris et al. (2015) has conducted research on the inheritance of the customary land amongst the practitioners of adat perpatih in Negeri Sembilan, particularly related to the implementation of the Customary Tenure Enactment (CTE) that allows members within the suku (clan) to transfer the ownership of the land to the foreigners and outsiders (Idris et al., 2015). Other research within the context of adat perpatih and adat law can also be seen on the study of customary sayings and their meanings and patterns (Jaafar et al., 2017), awareness and understanding of adat perpatih from the local communities (Abdul Latif et al., 2018), as well as the impacts of the traditional systems of land distribution to the households, clans and others (Kristiansen & Sulistiawati, 2016).

In adat perpatih, suku is one of the predominant practices that make up adat perpatih's system. Suku is a term that can be translated as a clan that traced the lineage and kinship of an individual from the mother's (female) side. Suku (clan) has an important position in adat perpatih, determining, for example, property inheritance, political administration and marriage. It is divided into 12 divisions: biduanda, batu hampar, paya kumbuh (pekumbuh), mungkal, tiga nenek, seri melenggang (semelenggang), seri lemak (selemak), batu belang, tanah datar, (tedatar), anak Aceh, anak Melaka and Tiga batu (Ibrahim, 1992:46). However, suku has lost its influence. According to You and Hardwick (2020), most contemporary local communities had been challenged by rapid cultural change, globalisation and political movements, as well as religious changes that had rendered many ICH practices powerless. In this context, this article aims to understand the roles of suku from the perspectives of the local practitioners by exploring the sustained significance of suku for the Malays of Negeri Sembilan, including how it is practised. This study finds that suku represents identity and confers a sense of belonging, as well as providing protection and security.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Adat perpatih was recognised as ICH by the Department of National Heritage Malaysia under the National Heritage Act in 2012 (Bernama, 2012). In this context, adat perpatih is considered the customary laws and living traditions of the Malays, particularly in Negeri Sembilan, which emphasise their uniqueness, rich culture and traditions related to matrilineal descent. Tasked with recognising the importance of ICH for the world's communities, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH was enacted. This convention has four designated purposes enabling it to serve this purpose:

(i) to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage, (ii) to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned, (iii) to raise awareness at the local, national, and international level of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof, and (iv) to provide for international cooperation and assistance. (UNESCO, 2003:2)

This Convention has inspired States Parties (countries which have adhered to the World Heritage Convention of UNESCO) to expand their fields of preservation, conservation and safeguarding of heritage sites to include intangible heritage. However, a broader discussion of ICH by academicians, practitioners, heritage professionals and researchers has exposed various issues, such as the definition of ICH, types of ICH, the involvement of local communities and heritage professionals and protection of ICH. Additionally, State Parties have started to develop national laws to ensure the protection of ICH.

For example, Malaysia developed the National Heritage Act 2005 to manage all matters related to ICH. In the National Heritage Act (2005:16), ICH is defined as

Any forms of expression, languages, lingual utterances, sayings, musically produced tunes, notes, audible lyrics, songs, folksongs, oral traditions, poetry, music, dances as produced by the performing arts, theatrical plays, audible compositions of sounds and music, martial arts, that may have existed or exist in relation to the heritage of Malaysia or any part of Malaysia or in relation to the heritage of a Malaysian community.

Meanwhile, in the Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH 2003, ICH is considered

The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2003:2)

Accordingly, ICH manifests within five domains: (i) oral traditions and expression, including language as a vehicle of ICH, (ii) performing arts, (iii) social practices, rituals and festive events, (iv) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, (e) traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003).

Building on the UNESCO definition, Arizpe (2007) has suggested several other elements that could be regarded as ICH, including life (birth, rites of ages and betrothal, wedding and death), social elements (kinship, community, settlements, broader and nation), biodiversity (botany, zoology, pharmacopeia, agriculture), land (nature, beliefs, names, landscapes and property), symbolic elements (signs, representations, rituals and flags), spiritual elements (cosmos vision, animistic beliefs, sacred books, liturgies), literary elements (oral literature, including legends and epic stories, and printed literature), performing arts (high arts and local arts), and festivities (season's calendar, games, religious festivals, school festivals).

Meanwhile, Logan (2007) defined ICH as ‘heritage that is embodied in people as opposed to inanimate object’, and Arrunnaporn (2009) emphasised ICH, in a research context, as ‘aesthetic, the importance of non-spiritual, symbolic or other social values people may associate with a site, as well as rituals, music, language, know-how, oral traditions, and the cultural spaces in which these “living heritage” traditions are played out’ (Arrunnaporn, 2009:149).

Various definitions of ICH have also been elaborated within academia, government and non-governmental organisations, especially in cases where ICH is close to the heart of a community, with its continued presence determining the existence and continuity of a local community. For such purposes, community has been described as ‘a homogeneous group in which no internal discrepancies and no intra and inter-individual differences are recognised’ (Wiesenfeld, 1996:338). Community members usually share similar characteristics in terms of residential, work, recreational, political, and religious components of their lives and are connected through socio-emotional ties which produce belonging (Wiesenfeld, 1996:339).

Many scholars have discussed ICH producing cultural identity for peoples, groups, nations and communities (Aikawa, 2007; Vecco, 2010) That is, ICH functions to create social and personal identity for individuals and the local community, with identity important for maintaining individual and group roots in a changing world. Most extant ICH reflects legacies from the past, providing a sense of continuity of the community (Lee, 2017:197). According to Lee (2017:195), ICH not only connects individuals, groups and communities in terms of belonging and identity but also offers deep spiritual, emotional and social links. Notably, UNESCO has encouraged human interaction in a mutual understanding of ICH, enabling people to retain their sense of identity and cultural continuity at the same time as promoting cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO, 2005)

Some ICHs are represented in the form of languages, performances, practices and dances, sometimes representing a whole country. Smeets (2004) indicated that language is essential for providing both groups and individuals identity, acting as a vehicle for expressing shared ICH between people belonging to a particular group or community. Building on this, Reid (1997) discussed the languages spoken to represent identity as Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah, Malaysia. The Kadazan and Dusun are indigenous people of Malaysia, and the Malaysian government has permitted their languages to be taught at schools (Reid, 1997). In this context, the collective efforts from the press, religious institutions and the government are considered to support the maintenance and sustenance of the indigenous dialects, enabling the preservation of those cultures.

Additionally, Aikawa (2007) recognised that ICH publicly symbolises and provides value to the cultural identities of people, groups and nations (Aikawa, 2007). That is, the identity of one’s society and community could be determined through immaterial criteria in the ICH and represented at various levels, including ‘national, regional, and local, even ... family’ (Logan, 2007:35). Accordingly, ICH can produce a sense of pride that leads those who

practise it to feel the need to preserve and protect their heritage. For Logan, ICH provides 'reminders of how societies can go wrong; they provide salutary lessons for the present and future generations. Heritage, tangible and intangible provides the basis of humanity's rich cultural diversity' (Logan, 2007:35).

Consequently, ICHs need to be safeguarded because ICHs express the creativity of and stimulate a sense of belonging for particular groups of people. Traditional innovation and creativity can be seen as passages connecting the past and the future. Additionally, a sense of belonging to a group or community could acknowledge an individual's existence and differentiate that individual from those that who do not belong to the group, while also acknowledging that, despite the differences between members of a community in terms of skills and resources, all members share a group feeling (Wiesenfeld, 1996:341). Belonging to a certain group or community enables a person to feel a guarantee of safety, comfort and group interdependence (Block, 2008:3).

As social beings, human are usually dependent upon one another; historically, this provided humans with resources such as food, protection from harm and the knowledge and ability to cultivate their skills (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006:697) Community consolidates this notion to guarantee a sense of security, which involves not only emotions and feelings but also physical safety (Hayfield & Schug, 2019:391). Additionally, safety, as conceived by members of a community, is adhered to, for example, welfare systems, healthcare systems and family policies (Hayfield & Schug, 2019:391).

In the context of adat perpatih, suku is considered to fundamentally ensure the continued existence of adat perpatih in Negeri Sembilan. Each suku is headed by a tua (or lembaga) and generally divided into various family units, which are headed by a senior male member on the wife's side called 'ibubapa' (or buapaak). The general population is divided into twelve suku, and each suku is generally an exogamous unit, with the principle of exogamy specifying the entrance of new males into each suku. In this context, a suku is a husband-receiving unit (tempat semenda), and a man is always the person marrying into the suku (orang semenda) (Kling, 1992:15).

Each suku is subdivided into the perut (womb, or major lineage), jurai (or ruang; minor lineage) and the matrilocal family units (keluarga). At each level, the actual kinship links can be traced and established. The deeper the level, the higher the level of grouping. While the kinship links between members are only putatively established at the suku and perut levels, this makes membership already too large for real accounting. Nonetheless, the reality of such links is not questioned; instead, the links are taken for granted as having already been sacredly established by a single ancestress in ancient times (Kling, 1992:15). Therefore, suku important allows members of the adat perpatih community to be acknowledged as adat perpatih practitioner and ensures their presence in the adat perpatih world.

## METHODOLOGY

This study took a qualitative approach, and fieldwork for data collection was conducted using ethnographic principles. In-depth interviews and participant observations were used to understand symbols, artefacts and other sources of data from a local perspective, as prescribed by Fetterman (2010) and Fielding (2008). Elements of the symbolic environment and surroundings (Fielding, 2008) were revealed through an ethnographic approach to the practice of adat perpatih among the Malays of Negeri Sembilan; that is, the underlying meaning of certain behaviours, articulations and interactions between members of the society, especially issues concerning how contemporary Malays perceived and represented the adat perpatih.

**Table 1:** Research Participants of adat perpatih

Research Participants (RP)	Gender (F/M)	Age
RP1	F	50s
RP2	M	60s
RP3	F	60s
RP4	F	30s
RP5	M	30s
RP6	F	30s
RP7	F	30s
RP8	F	30s
RP9	M	30s
RP10	F	70s
RP11	F	30s
RP12	F	20s

When approaching research participants, the study utilised a purposive sampling technique. Having specific target and purpose of this study made it more convenient (Creswell, 2013) for the researcher to approach research participants. As Table 1 shows, 12 research participants were interviewed; to protect their identity, research participants were coded as RP1 through to RP12. Research participants were recruited from a broad range of age groups, educations and occupations to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic. During the interview sessions and participant observations, information was collected in various ways, with the documentation stage following the process of 'logging data' developed by Lofland and Lofland (1995:66). The various forms of data recording included observational field notes, interview write-ups, mapping, census taking, photographing, sound recording and document collection (Creswell, 2013:149)

Given qualitative data centred on the importance of events (Miles et al., 2014) that occurred during the fieldwork, reports of such events were descriptive and narrative oriented. This necessitated a process of interpreting, explaining, understanding and reflecting on original impressions and intuitions of what had occurred during the fieldwork (Dey, 1993). This study used thematic

analysis, with all the fieldwork's raw data transcribed and analysed using analytic memo-ing, as recommended by Dey (1993) and Miles et al. (2014).

This constituted an extended version of the narrative reporting style, in which data needs to be synthesised into higher-level analytic meanings (Saldana et al., 2011). Ultimately, analysis led the viewpoints and emic perspectives of research perceptions to guide understanding of the Malay perceptions of adat perpatih.

### *Findings and Discussions*

This study revealed that suku has various significant roles in the adat perpatih community. Categorisation of these roles promoted discussion in the context of three overarching themes; suku as formation of identity, suku as providing a sense of belonging, and suku as protection and safety.

#### *Suku as formation of identity*

Adat perpatih has been listed as ICH by Malaysia's Department of National Heritage, Malaysia; a feature of ICH mentioned is 'self-identification' (Lenzerini, 2011:101). In this study, the Malays who practised adat perpatih in Negeri Sembilan identified themselves according to their suku. As mentioned, suku acts as a form of identification for an individual, expressing their status as adat perpatih practitioners. Twelve divisions of suku have been described by Ibrahim (1992:46): biduanda, batu hampar, paya kumbuh (pekumbuh), mungkal, tiga nenek, seri melenggang (semelenggang), seri lemak (selemak), batu belang, tanah datar, (tedatar), anak Aceh, anak Melaka and Tiga batu. Belonging to one of these suku, hence, forms part of an individual's identity.

For example, RP11 identified herself as part of the suku Tiga batu, while RP1 and RP12 were from the suku Semelenggang. Meanwhile, RP5 explained that he belonged to suku Selemak, the suku of his mother:

I followed my mother's suku. According to adat perpatih, the children will follow the mother's suku. From my father's side, he is from suku Tiga batu. (Interview, RP5)

Elsewhere, RP10 claimed that she was from suku Selemak and her late husband was from orang lingkungan (Interview, RP10), explaining that orang lingkungan was part of the adat lingkungan surrounding Seri Menanti. Given the interview took place at Seri Menanti, some community members followed the adat lingkungan, a type of adat applied to the Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negeri Sembilan and his officials. In the confined lingkungan area, the Yang di-Pertuan Besar has full authority and the right to find his own followers among adat perpatih members, with the permission of other adat perpatih leaders (such as Penghulu and Undang) (Selat, 2014). Generally, this study found that most research participants were very conscious of where they belonged, able to explain their suku.

Aligning with the suku practices in the adat perpatih community of Negeri Sembilan, which clearly emphasise the importance of the maternal lineage, Campelo et al. (2014:159) recognised the importance of ancestry for the people of the Chathams, which are strongly connected to Maori or European settlers, who consider ancestry to have the power to connect individuals to history, land, rights and ownership, as well as providing a sense of belonging. This genealogical relation enables communities to claim their sense of self and family identity as having been passed down through generations, with roles and responsibility inherited to continue instructing the community on how to be a part of the world in the present.

### *Suku provides a sense of belonging*

Suku also provides the Malays of the adat perpatih community in Negeri Sembilan with a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging for these communities is derived from their suku, with a strong sense of brotherhood within a suku leading a suku's members to acknowledge each another as family. When a new member becomes part of a suku, a berkedim (being a brother) ceremony takes place, allowing the new member to be recognised and accepted into the adat perpatih community. Given berkedim is one of the most dominant practices in the adat perpatih system, the process allows individuals to feel a sense of belonging and feel reassured of their safety and well-being.

For human needs, 'belonging' is essential. According to Baumeister and Leary, 'as John Donne famously wrote in 1624, "No [person] is an island"' (1995:497), a statement Baumeister and Leary (1995:497). Those authors also refer to the psychological theory proposed by Abraham Maslow, known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This theory positions love and the need to belong at the centre of human life, demonstrating the importance for fitting in and adapting to human needs, with Baumeister and Leary (1995:499) '...the need to belong [is] found to some degree in all humans, in all cultures, although naturally ... there [are] individual differences in strength and intensity, as well as cultural and individual variations in how people express and satisfy the need' (1995:499).

It is important to emphasise that the continued practice of adat perpatih awakens a sense of belonging and identity amongst Malays in Negeri Sembilan, with the ICH described by UNESCO (2003) encouraging a sense of identity and continuity for the local community. According to Peletz, most Malays of the Negeri Sembilan are proud of their roots in Minangkabau, which distinguish their sense of culture (Peletz, 1988b; 1994b), and provide them with a sense of 'home', place and memory (Naguib, 2013). Additionally, most Malays in Negeri Sembilan speak their own dialect, which also reflects their affiliation with the Minangkabau culture (Mat Awal et al., 2013).

### *Suku as protection and safety*

Belonging to a group can also be seen to offer 'protection'; that is, an individual's welfare is assured by grouping with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); normally, an individual forms an attachment to a group through some



similarity and sharing of cultural traits, as well as through social relations (Campelo et al., 2014). Being a group member enables an individual to receive privileges, including protection, care, security and mutual defence from harm (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). This is similar to a child requiring not only care and food but also protection from their parents (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Additionally, in certain cases, an individual might receive assistance from others to care for their children and ensure their welfare if they die. Trust and social bonds within the community guarantee this, allowing an individual to feel generally safe and secure (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

The protection system for members of a suku was materialised in the case of a man who needed to return to his original family after his wife died. According to RP11,

...the man will return to their main rumpun [family] or their mother's homeland if he does not have anywhere to go. ... if he was kicked out by his family or wife, he can stay [temporarily] and live with his relatives ... adat perpatih looks after his or her blood and heirs. (Interview, RP11)

RP 11 also explained in referring to her late husband that,

For example, in the case of my late husband, he had no female siblings, so he could not inherit the inheritance. Therefore, the inheritance was returned to his relatives [as rightful heirs]. Men are cared for and protected by their heirs [referring to his mother, his sister(s) and nieces]. As people say, we will look after them. (Interview, RP11)

Other examples include the berkedim ceremony, the process of a man entering a suku. A berkedim is considered a process demanding substantial responsibility from members of the adat perpatih community towards their new member. Thus, this process requires members of an existing suku to provide protection, loyalty and security to new members. However, being part of a suku does not suggest a person automatically receives these things; instead, they must observe the attitudes and behaviours of that society. Notably, a person behaving inappropriately or being censured for misconduct brings malu (shame) not only to their family but to the entire suku (Interview, RP12).

Consequently, all members of a suku need to ensure that everybody plays their part and is accountable for their actions and behaviours to ensure that the legacy of their suku is safely carried into the future by the next generation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study's findings illustrated that suku is significant in the formation of identity, providing a sense of belonging and acting as protection and security for Malays of the adat perpatih community in Negeri Sembilan. Without suku, the essence of adat perpatih would become less important and potentially lost. As adat perpatih is not static system and is subjected to change to suit with the evolving circumstances and modern needs, it is hoped that younger

generations could renew their interest in this important ICH so that, adat perpatih could be sustained in the future.

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