



THE BODY CONCEPT OF TRADITIONAL HEALERS IN WEST SUMATRA



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ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 14 August 2018

Revised: 17 September 2018

Accepted: 23 October 2018

Published: 19 November 2018

Keywords

Anthropology of the body
Minangkabau studies
Body concept
Traditional healers
West Sumatra.

In this article, the authors illustrate the body concept of a group of traditional Minangkabau healers in West Sumatra. This body concept plays a particular role in the healing methods as it is considered to be the first element that must be learned by students of traditional healers. Furthermore, the researchers link the ideas about the body to specific features of the matrilineal society. The research was conducted in a village community in the interior of West Sumatra. With this approach, the authors intend to give another point of view in the field of Minangkabau studies. It is looked into the body scheme by considering ideas from an anthropology of the body.

Contribution/ Originality: This study documents the healing concept of a group of traditional Minangkabau healers. It offers another perspective in the field of Minangkabau studies as it looks into this society from a different point of view,

1. INTRODUCTION

The Minangkabau in West Sumatra is one of the largest matrilineal societies. Many researchers were fascinated by this culture. As a consequence there are numerous researchers that looked into this society from different angles like the co-existence of matrilineal and Islamic elements (Abdullah, 1966) law and local jurisdiction (Tanner, 1969; Benda-Beckmann, 1979) gender studies (Sanday, 2002) folk psychology (Heider, 2011) and many more. However, there are not many researchers that delved into the field of traditional Minangkabau medicine. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this research is to deliver a new perspective by looking into the body concept of the healers. Moreover, it is intended to analyse this concept in order to detect certain peculiarities.

In this research, the authors look into the body scheme of a group of traditional healers in West Sumatra. Different types of healers are responsible for the treatment of various medical disorders: Some religious scholars focus on a more spiritual way of healing, and some healers can be called traditional healers (*dukun*) in the sense of referring to a healing system that was handed down over a period of many centuries. These healers are still influential for the treatment of specific medical and psychological problems.

In this article, the researchers focus on the traditional healers and their body concept. This scheme is essential as it helps to detect the place of emotional disturbances. Furthermore, it is also relevant for specific treatment

methods. This research considers ideas from the field of the field of 'anthropology of the body'. It is intended to get new inspirations. Particularly the question of the interrelationship between the cognitive ideas of the body and the matrilineal society should be answered.

2. LITERATURE

The literature about the body concept in West Sumatra is quite limited. One of the most extensive works about traditional Minangkabau medicine was written by Kleiweg (1912). His work contains many ethnographic details and can still be used as a kind of reference. Many other scientists looked into the interrelationships of the matrilineal society like Mitchell (1969) and Marzali (2003). Mitchell (1969) was one of the first authors who stressed that the Minangkabau have peculiar features if someone looks at the topic of medical disorders.

Marzali (2003) used the term '*kompleks Minangkabau*' (Minangkabau complex) which describes the 'tense' situation of male Minangkabau due to their marginal position in the society. Heider is another author who looks into folk psychology and the role of emotions (2011). His research focuses on cognitive concepts and gives an impression of that topic.

Recent research teams studied the relationship between the environment and medical disorders (Yunarti *et al.*, 2014). Other authors mention that there are medical disorders that can be considered as Culture Bound Syndromes (CBS). In Minangkabau, there are some illnesses which belong to that category (Almos and Pramono, 2015). All of the mentioned authors focus on a 'general' picture whilst this article intends to look into the body concept of traditional healers.

3. RESEARCH

This research was conducted in a village community in the interior of West Sumatra. One healer was very open-minded and became the main informant. He even considered one of the researchers to be his student. The healer lives in a small hut in the interior of West Sumatra, and he has a group of students. So both the teacher and the group of students were asked to teach the body concept.

The main methods of collecting data were observation and open-ended (mostly unstructured) interviews. The observation was mainly non-participatory as the researchers did not intervene in the healing methods. Moreover, in the field of the body concept, the understanding of emotions is of utmost importance. Therefore, the primary means to get knowledge were unstructured interviews.

The interviews were unstructured due to two reasons: First the research was mainly explorative. This fact means the researchers had no idea about the body concept of the healers at all. Second: The healers themselves decided what to teach. As the body concept is the 'starting point' for a deeper understanding of the healing methods, the healers talked about this concept in the very beginning.

4. ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

Some traditional *dukun* use a kind of 'map' which has to be memorized by the students of traditional medicine (see Figure 1).

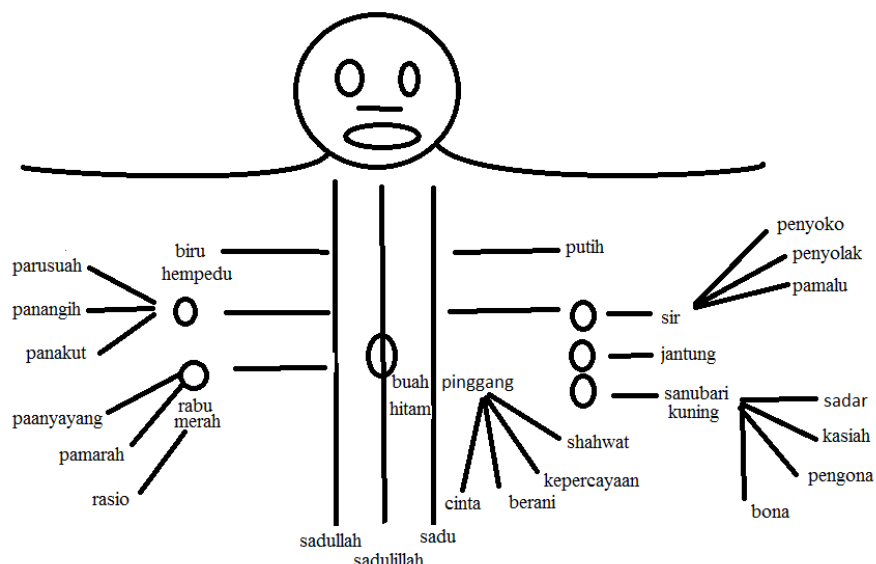


Figure-1. The Body Concept of some traditional Healers in West Sumatra (Stark, 2018)

If we look at Figure 1, we can see some peculiarities.¹ The terms are all in Minangkabau language, but for the understanding, the authors will only mention the body organs and offer the English words of the mentioned emotions. There is a relationship between emotions and specific body organs. The whole connections look as follows:

- Gall/ Bile (*Hempedu*) is related to the emotions of being sad, scared, and crying.
- Lung (*Rabu*) is related to the feelings of love, anger, and ratio.
- Kidney (*Buah Pinggang*) is related to the emotions of love, braveness, trust, and desire.
- The inner part of the heart (*sanubari*) is connected to awareness, affection, remembrance, and truth,
- The heart (*jantung*) is not connected to any emotional features.
- *Sir* is connected to emotions that express liking, rejection and shyness.

So what does it mean if specific organs are related to emotions or particular features? There could be an emotionally disturbed person who is fearful and cries very often. In such a case the healers know that the disturbance is located in the gallbladder. In one interview a healer told that many medical disorders originate from the gallbladder. In Figure 1, other essential elements can be detected. For example, there are colours related to certain body regions like blue (*biru*), red (*merah*), yellow (*kuning*), white (*putih*), and black (*hitam*). The healers were asked about their meaning, but they could not answer.

In the centre of the body are three significant veins which 'divide' the body into two halves. In an emic understanding, it is necessary to know that the belief in magic is still widespread. A magician could use his or her knowledge to disrupt the order of the veins and as a consequence, the victim might become crazy. However, if the vein is cut then the victim will die. The three blood vessels divide the body into two halves. In general, the side of the heart contains the positive features while the other part is connected to negative feelings. Such a dichotomy is not new in the field of anthropology of the body.

In many Islamic societies, there is the idea that the 4 humors air, water, fire, and earth constitute the body. In Malaysia, this belief is widespread (Laderman, 1992). In West Sumatra there is a similar idea:

- Air stands for the blood vessels.
- Fire stands for the blood.
- Earth stands for the flesh.
- Water stands for the bones.

¹Figure 1 mentioned in the unpublished Ph.D. research of Stark, 2018.

If we look at the healing methods, it can be discovered that there is a differentiation between an inner and outer way of treatment. Sometimes the patient has to drink a mixture of plants. For example, the healers put some leaves of *hempedu tanah* (Bot. *Andrographispa Niculata*) in a glass of hot water. After that, the patient drinks it. This drink is considered to be useful for the treatment of Malaria. On the other side, the healers describe an outer form of treatment for other medical disorders. For instance, if a child is considered to be slightly disturbed by an evil spirit and gets a fever.² In such a case, the child is treated by four different healing plants. The plants are dipped into water and this water is sprinkled over the back of the patient for three days (Stark *et al.*, 2016).

The healers also stress that the body consists of the Arabic letters *mim*, *ha*, and *da*. Furthermore, they emphasize that these are the letters of the name of Prophet Muhammad. So there is a religious element involved in the body scheme.

5. DISCUSSION

The anthropologists who focus on the body concept can analyse and look into the body from different perspectives. Elisabeth Hsu outlines some of these perspectives. She differentiates three approaches (Hsu, 2003).

- (a) A structural approach: This approach considers that the body can be related to the social structure. This relationship can be analysed in a structural way.
- (b) A phenomenological approach: The primary goal is to find out how people perceive the world that surrounds them.
- (c) A post-structural approach: This approach looks into the field of body politics.

Each of these perspectives has its advantages and disadvantages. It depends on the situation which aspect is the most promising. Regarding the traditional healers and their view of the body, it seems that a structural approach appears to be most suitable. It is hoped that the researchers can detect structures and dichotomies that are not easily recognizable. For example, in Figure 1 there is a kind of opposition between a 'good' and 'not so good' part of the body.

The body concept of the healer is quite fascinating. The first obvious point is that it considers only the area around the stomach. Here it can be assumed that ideas of society play a particular role. In the Minangkabau society of West Sumatra, there are matrilineal sub-clans. The people call these sub-clans '*paruik*' which means 'stomach'. This term refers to the fact that the people of the matrilineal clan are descendants of one 'womb'. The well-being of the social structure is essential for society. If someone 'disturbs' this situation by being emotionally unstable then this is a danger for the whole social system. Therefore the society must maintain harmony. For the healer, it means not only to restore but also to protect the community from a kind of collapse. For instance, in West Sumatra, there are Culture-Bound Syndromes (CBS) that are related to emotions and sorcery. For the locals, it means someone with ill-wishes can disturb the emotional conditions of a person. A victim might cry, refuse to eat, and so on. The healers can know the location of the problem by considering the body concept.

In Figure 1, five colours are mentioned: two on the left side, two on the right side and one in the centre: We can say it consists of 4 colours plus 1. The Leiden school of anthropology would call it 4-5 scheme (Josselin, 1977). According to their research results, the 4-5 scheme is widespread in the Indonesian archipelago. At this point, it can be stated that the body concept of the Minangkabau belongs to a greater system. It must also be considered that colours have a specific meaning for the society of West Sumatra. Some scholars about the traditional customs (*adat*) stress this fact. Here are the colours that are mentioned in the body concept of the traditional healers:

- Blue. This colour means truth and *ketertiban* (order). Further, it represents the outer area of *Pesisir*.³
- Red. Red implies braveness and it represents the area of *Agam*.

² Such a disorder is called *keteguran*.

³ The three major areas that form the interior of West Sumatra are *Tanah Datar*, *Agam* and *50 Kota*.

- Black. This colour means braveness and steadfastness. It represents the region of *50 Kota*.
- White is a colour that stands for purity and honesty and represents the Islamic scholars.
- Yellow stands for respect and represents the district of *Tanah Datar*.

This colour scheme was explained by Amir (2007). So the body concept appears in a different light. All of the main areas of West Sumatra are covered by mentioning the colours. Furthermore, the black colour is in the centre. In a traditional understanding, black is the colour of the clan representatives (*panghulu*). This fact can be a hint that the body scheme which is illustrated above is close to a society in which the *adat* (traditional customs) is at the centre. It is interesting that the head is not part of the body scheme. This fact could indicate that the body concept is related to the matrilineal way of life in the village communities. Even though there are formal clan representatives but decisions are made with a mutual consensus. The whole society discusses the 'problems' before coming to a solution. Interestingly the matrilineal sub-clans are called *paruik* (stomach). This term shows that the matrilineal society stresses the importance of decisions that were made by many individuals and not only by one 'head'. Moreover, it must be stressed that in the Minangkabau society there is a legendary figure (Abdullah, 1970). The name of the person is *Bundo Kanduang* (Handrianto, 2017). The meaning of *Bundo Kanduang* is 'the mother of the womb'. It could be a hint that it refers to the matrilineage, but it is also an indication that the 'element of life' is around the central part of the body.

6. CONCLUSION

In this article, it was intended to give a new 'perspective' of the Minangkabau society, namely the concept of the body of a group of traditional healers. This body scheme of traditional Minangkabau healers is essential for the treatment as it uncovers the area of a medical or psychological disturbance. However, this research discovered that there is an interrelationship between the ideas about the body and society. The maintenance of a peaceful society is very important for the community. A disruption might endanger the way of living together. The same thing is true for a sick person who is disturbed emotionally. The body scheme refers to certain emotions and the origin of the disturbance. Specific dichotomies give further hints about the fascinating body concept and how it is interwoven with ideas that can be found in the society as a greater unit. It can be said that the body is a particular kind of reflection of circumstances that are similar to the situation in the society.

The body concept also shows that there is an esoteric knowledge which helps the healers to make a proper diagnosis. The emotions are related to specific body parts, and outside elements like spirits (*jimns*) might disturb the patient. The healers know how to act if a person has particular emotional problems.

The mentioned body concept helps to look at the society in another way. Often the researchers look at the elements of the matrilineal Minangkabau society as a whole. If a scientist analyses this body concept of traditional healers, then he or she can see that a harmonic way of life is essential for the people and the body concept helps to maintain that.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Contributors/Acknowledgement: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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