

Leveraging local wisdom in da'wah communication: A case study of the Semai indigenous community in Cameron Highlands Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

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The topic of da'wah is a crucial pillar that underpins effective and sustainable communication between the preacher and the target audience. Understanding the local wisdom practiced within communities is vital, as it can serve as meaningful discourse in da'wah, making messages more relevant and impactful. Recognizing and utilizing indigenous knowledge allows preachers to tailor their approaches to resonate deeply with community values, especially when engaging with indigenous groups. Therefore, this paper examines the local wisdom of the Semai community in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, as a basis for da'wah communication. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, data were gathered through document review of journal articles and in-depth interviews with six Semai informants. Thematic analysis identified six key categories of local wisdom: hand skills, philosophy, social practices, leadership, medicinal knowledge, and survival skills. These elements reflect the community's cultural identity and offer valuable topics for da'wah. The study underscores that preachers' understanding of local wisdom is essential for crafting relevant, respectful, and effective messages. Such knowledge not only enhances communication and community engagement but also aids in documenting and preserving their cultural heritage. Incorporating local wisdom into da'wah strategies fosters stronger connections, ensuring the message's longevity and the community's cultural continuity.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is one of the few investigations into the local wisdom of Indigenous communities, particularly the Semai community. However, this article contributes to the body of knowledge by analyzing and highlighting ways in which da'wah approaches can benefit from the use of local wisdom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples in Malaysia are commonly referred to as Orang Asli (Carey, 1976). The term "Orang" translates to "people," a widely understood designation. The word "Asli," derived from the Arabic "Asali," carries connotations of being "original," "pure," "genuine," "classical," or "well-born," implying a sense of noble lineage and authenticity (Asmah, Samsur, & Noor, 2018; Hamid, 2014). Accordingly, the name Orang Asli is often associated with positive connotations, emphasizing their status as the original inhabitants of the land. In Malaysia, the term is legally defined under Clause 3(1) of the Aboriginal People Act 1954 (Revised 1974), which describes Orang Asli as persons whose male ancestors are members of indigenous ethnic groups, who speak indigenous languages, and follow indigenous customs and beliefs. This includes descendants through males, adopted individuals raised within indigenous communities, and children of unions between indigenous females and males of other races, provided they

maintain indigenous language and customs. The three main ethnic groups classified under Orang Asli are the Senoi, Negrito, and Proto-Malay, each consisting of several sub-ethnic groups. For example, the Negrito include Kensiu, Kintak, Lanoh, Jahai, Mandriq, and Bateq; the Senoi include Che Wong, MahMeri, Jahut, Semoq Beri, Semai, and Temiar; and the Proto-Malay or Malay Proto include Semelai, Temuan, Orang Kuala, Orang Kanaq, Orang Seletar, and Jakun/Orang Ulu. As of 2023, the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) estimated that the population of Orang Asli in Malaysia is approximately 215,215.

Despite their integration into the modern world, the Orang Asli community remains a heterogeneous group, rich in customs and cultural practices rooted in their close relationship with nature. Their traditional beliefs often involve supernatural beings, reflecting a worldview intertwined with spirituality and cosmology (Mohd & Shuhairimi, 2004; Nik Haslinda, 2017). Their culture encompasses both material and non-material elements: tangible aspects such as physical traits, dialects, attire, crafts, and dwellings; and intangible elements including laws, practices, beliefs, and oral traditions passed down through generations (Siti, 2015). These cultural elements, developed over long periods through interaction with their environment, represent a form of local wisdom that sustains their identity and social cohesion.

However, despite the richness and uniqueness of Orang Asli culture and local wisdom, these traditional knowledge systems are increasingly at risk of erosion due to modernization and external influences. This poses a challenge for *da'wah* efforts aimed at engaging the community effectively. A significant gap exists in understanding how indigenous cultural practices and local wisdom can be integrated into *da'wah* communication strategies. Without this understanding, *da'i* (preachers) may face difficulties in establishing meaningful connections with the community and preserving their cultural heritage. Therefore, recognizing and documenting the local wisdom of the Orang Asli becomes crucial for both effective religious outreach and the preservation of their cultural identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Da'wah* Communication

Da'wah communication shares foundational elements with traditional communication models, including the source, topic, channel, receiver, effect, feedback, and noise (Bambang, 2015). However, the primary focus in *da'wah* is on the roles and functions of these components, as well as the ultimate goal of the communication process. The pillar in *da'wah* is typically the preacher (*da'i*), who conveys messages (*ma'wdu'* or *maddah al-da'wah*) to the *mad'u*, or target audience. The core subject of *da'wah* is Islam itself, often referred to as *ma'wdu' da'wah* (Zaydan, 1993).

According to Al-Qaradawi (2012), the message of *da'wah* rests on three fundamental pillars: faith, worship, and morality. Samsul (2013) elaborates that *da'wah* topics encompass various domains, including faith based on the pillars of belief, ethical conduct (both commendable *mahmudah* and reprehensible *mazmumah*), legal rulings related to worship, family, transactions, and criminal law, as well as broader issues such as brotherhood, education, social solidarity, and cultural practices aligned with Islamic principles. Other relevant topics include promoting *al-amr bi al-ma'ruf* (enjoining good) and *al-nahy 'an al-munkar* (forbidding evil), which aim to foster societal righteousness and prevent moral decline. Syarul, Ahmad, and Ahmad (2015) highlight that the subject of *da'wah* constitutes significant issues intended to attract and engage the audience, guiding them onto the "straight path" as prescribed in Islam. Abdullah (2023) emphasizes that Islam encompasses all aspects of human life, extending beyond faith and ritual worship to include ethical, social, and economic dimensions. Therefore, preachers must understand the comprehensive teachings of Islam to effectively convey its message.

Muhammad (1978) underscores that the ultimate goal of *da'wah* is to establish harmony between humans and Allah SWT, and among humans themselves by fostering balanced relationships and spiritual fulfillment. Additionally, Bambang (2015) notes the importance of early feedback in the communication process, which involves gathering demographic and psychographic data about the target audience prior to message dissemination (Arora,

2019; Ross, 2013). Such analysis enables the *da'i* to tailor messages according to the audience's background, worldview, and cultural context, facilitating more meaningful and effective engagement.

Understanding the local wisdom of Orang Asli communities is crucial in this context. As indigenous peoples with distinct customs, beliefs, and cultural practices, their worldview and social norms significantly influence how they interpret and respond to *da'wah* messages. Incorporating local wisdom into *da'wah* strategies can bridge cultural gaps, making the message more relatable and impactful. It also helps in respecting and preserving their cultural identity, which is vital for fostering trust and cooperation. Given the risk of cultural erosion amid modernization, documenting and integrating Orang Asli's local wisdom into religious outreach is not only a means of effective communication but also an effort to safeguard their heritage. Recognizing their unique cultural assets enables *da'i* to deliver messages that resonate deeply, thereby promoting understanding, acceptance, and sustainable community development.

2.2. Local Wisdom

The term "local" was first introduced by Wales (1951) in his book "The Making of Greater India Study on Southeast Asia Culture Change", as cited by Muhammad and Mohd (2020). In anthropology, the concept has been described using terms such as "local genius" or "local intelligence" (Rafiek, 2012). Over time, scholars have increasingly referred to this concept as "local knowledge" and "local wisdom" (Muhammad, Paranoan, Masdar, Siallagan, & Achmad, 2017; Rosidi, 2011). Scholars have offered various definitions and conceptualizations of local wisdom. Dahliani, Setijanti, and Purwanita (2015) for instance, define it as: (1) knowledge derived from specific experiences and developed within the local community; (2) practical, experiential knowledge acquired through experimentation, imitation, and everyday trial and error; (3) empirical knowledge that is not purely theoretical; and (4) comprehensive, integrated knowledge rooted in tradition and culture. Influences on local wisdom include factors such as culture, environment, religion, and socioeconomic conditions.

Muhammad et al. (2017) argue that local knowledge comprises sensible, contextually relevant ideas imbued with moral principles and wisdom, which are embraced by community members. It encompasses the accumulated information and experiences passed down through generations concerning daily life, work, and cultural practices. Jamal, Jamilah, Anis, Hasmadi, and Imaduddin (2020) further emphasize that this knowledge is transmitted culturally, from one generation to the next, shaping how communities respond to each other and their environment. Loyalty to these beliefs and practices is often tied to inheritance, reflecting a collective acceptance of values, group solidarity, resources, skills, and decision-making processes. Such elements form a framework that guides community activities and social organization. According to Muhammad and Abdul (2019), local wisdom reflects a society's core beliefs or policies values that are inherited, often believed, and actively utilized within the community. Muhammad and Mohd (2020) expand on this by describing local wisdom as the accumulated knowledge and expertise specific to a community, passed down through generations based on past experiences. It encompasses a high, profound, and creative way of understanding societal phenomena, with both explicit and implicit values. Explicit values are observable through behavior, while implicit values require careful interpretation to uncover underlying philosophies often needing guidance from previous generations to be fully understood.

Rachmat, Setiadi, and Nasir (2020) characterize local wisdom as a set of beliefs, practices, and knowledge culturally transmitted across generations, emerging through adaptive processes. Jamal et al. (2020) highlight that local wisdom encompasses a community's knowledge, moral teachings, and customs, which serve as guiding principles for daily conduct and social organization. These principles help maintain social cohesion and provide a moral compass for community life. Local knowledge that fosters community pride can be categorized into two types: (1) tangible knowledge, such as traditional texts, architecture, and cultural symbols; and (2) intangible knowledge, including taboos, advice, and oral tips (Muhammad & Mohd, 2020). Communication of this knowledge

occurs through various channels, including cultural values, beliefs, rituals, customs, local languages, stories, music, and the sustainable use of natural resources (Ellen, Parkes, & Bicker, 2000; Pesurnay, 2018).

3. ORANG ASLI SEMAI

3.1. Background

The term Semai refers to a group of people who speak the Semai dialect. According to Dentan (1968) in Gomes (1988), the Semai self-identify using toponyms such as *mai darat* (people in the interior) or *mai cenan* (people on the hillside). They also identify themselves as Senoi, which translates to "man" or "human" in their language. Additionally, they may specify their identity through the name of a nearby town, such as *Mai Tapah*, *Mai Kampar*, or *Mai Bidor*, or by the name of a significant river valley, like *Mai Bertak*, *Mai Cenderi*, or *Mai Slip*—where "Mai" means "people." The Semai live in numerous settlements or *lengrii* (regions) along larger river valleys, with smaller rivers or tributaries serving as the basis for these names. They often identify themselves by their *lengrii* names, such as *Mai Tenlop* (people of *Tenlop lengrii*), *Mai Lengap*, or *Mai Enlak*, where these names correspond to the rivers that define their territories. These *lengrii* are typically bounded by natural features like rivers and mountains, with *Mai Pasak* signifying "true indigenous people" of these regions. Membership within these groups is primarily determined by cognatic kinship (Gomes, 1988).

Historically, Sharifah et al. (2019) note that a team of Cambridge researchers, conducting their first field investigation in 1899–1900, believed that the Semai belonged to the Sakai tribe inhabiting the mountainous regions northwest of Pahang and southwest of Perak. The Semai are descendants of the Hoabinhian and Neolithic tribes. Today, they are primarily dispersed across Central and Southern Perak, as well as Western Pahang, within the Titiwangsa Range (Mohd & Shuhairimi, 2004). Notably, Semai communities in Perak are found in Tapah, Parit, Batang Padang, Behrang Ulu, Gorang, Kampar, Redang Punggor, Perak Selatan, and Pos Gedong, while in Pahang, their settlements include Tanah Rata and Kuala Lipis (Siti, Riduan, & Mohd, 2019).

The Semai are part of the larger Senoi ethnic group, numbering approximately 61,684 individuals nationwide. The largest population resides in Perak, with 35,788 members, followed by Pahang, with 24,489. Other states have significantly smaller numbers, as summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. The distribution of Semai Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia.

State in Peninsular Malaysia	Total population of Orang Asli
Perak	35,788
Pahang	24,489
Selangor	1,124
Kelantan	172
Johor	39
Negeri Sembilan	45
Melaka	15
Kedah	10
Terengganu	2
Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur	0
Total	61,684

Source: <https://www.jakoa.gov.my/orang-asli/>.

In terms of physical characteristics, the Semai tend to be slightly taller than the Negritos, with wavy hair and a fairer complexion. Conversely, Negritos are generally smaller, about five feet tall, with curly hair (Clare, 2023; Mohd & Alang, 2018).

3.2. Cultural and Religious Beliefs

For most Semai, their ethnic identity is closely tied to their traditional spiritual beliefs, primarily animism (Gomes, 1988). They believe in spirits such as *hala'* (shamans), *gunik* (guardian spirits), *nyani* (spirits), *ruai* (soul of

the head), and *klook* (soul of the body). Ritual practices like *asik* and *kubut* are integral to their spiritual life, reflecting their belief that every object around them possesses a spirit or extraordinary power capable of influencing their lives. Living harmoniously with the universe is fundamental, with happiness and well-being linked to maintaining this spiritual balance (Mohd & Shuhairimi, 2004).

Their spiritual worldview encompasses natural features like mountains, hills, gorges, large boulders, valleys, and trees, which are considered sacred and inhabited by guardian spirits. The Semai believe that a deity called *Nyenang* governs the universe, wielding immense power capable of causing disasters if disrespected. They also recognize supernatural abilities (*nyanik pecnoc* and *nyanik ratah*) believed to protect them from illness, natural calamities, and misfortune. Ritual phrases like "tabik tuk, anak cucu tumpeng lalu" are used to appease spirits and avoid misfortune, as neglecting these customs may result in illness or spiritual possession (Mohd & Alang, 2018).

Furthermore, the Semai acknowledge a supreme supernatural being responsible for creation and view natural phenomena like lightning as divine entities that influence human behavior and enforce social norms. They also recognize other gods (*cyanic*) associated with misfortune, disease, and natural disasters. Rituals such as chicken, flower, and unpeeled rice sacrifices are performed to appease earth spirits and ensure a bountiful harvest (Jamilah et al., 2024).

Although the majority adhere to animistic beliefs, some Semai practice other religions such as Bahá'í, Islam, and Christianity, leading to variations in rituals surrounding life events like marriage, birth, and funerals. Nonetheless, animism remains a core aspect of their worldview, emphasizing the importance of maintaining positive relationships with the environment and respecting the spirits believed to inhabit it.

3.3. Lifestyle and Subsistence

The Semai's livelihoods are closely linked to their natural environment. They rely on hunting, gathering, and subsistence farming cultivating crops such as cassava, bananas, *petai* (stink bean), rubber, cocoa, jackfruit, legumes, and maize. They also harvest forest products like bamboo, rattan, *mengkuang* (screw pine), *tongkat ali* (long jack), *kelulut* honey, and wild tubers. Hunting includes animals like deer, wild boars, and jungle fowls (Sharifah et al., 2019).

Anthropological studies categorize the Semai in Perak into highland and lowland groups. Highland Semai predominantly engage in farming, fishing, hunting, and gathering forest resources, while lowland Semai often practice shifting cultivation, work as laborers, or participate in small-scale trade, gradually integrating into the modern economy (Sharina, Rafidah, & Subri, 2023). Despite limited craftsmanship skills, some communities, such as those in Pos Senderut, Pahang, are renowned for their weaving and bamboo craftwork—creating mats, baskets, and decorated tools passed down through generations.

3.4. Language and Social Structure

The Semai speak their native Semai language, a Mon-Khmer language within the Aslian language family. However, due to interactions with neighboring communities, especially Malays, many have adopted Malay as a second language. This linguistic shift is a concern for some scholars, as it may lead to the decline of the Semai mother tongue and cultural identity (Asmah et al., 2018; Noriah & Meriam, 2005; Sumathi & Inge, 2018).

Leadership within the Semai community is traditionally held by a *Penghulu* or *Batin*, often chosen from influential figures such as shamans, traditional healers, or respected community elders. Leadership roles include positions like *Tok Raja*, *Tok Menteri*, *Tok Batin*, *Jurukerah*, and *Tandil*. Leadership emphasizes collective responsibility, with decision-making rooted in consensus and respect for traditional values. Chua, Kadirvelu, Yasin, and Park (2021) highlight that Semai leadership is characterized by shared responsibility, close ties to ancestral spirits, and a deep connection to the environment. Leaders serve as mediators, preserving social harmony,

upholding indigenous knowledge, and guiding the community through traditional practices rooted in mutual respect and collective participation.

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study is qualitative in nature and employs a content analysis design. Journal articles and other documents were analyzed to obtain data. Specific topics, as described in the conceptual framework of local wisdom, were used to analyze the data. In-depth interviews with six informants two from the Semai community in Kampung Orang Asli (KOA) Bah Renyis, two from Kampung Telimau and Pos Lemoi were conducted using semi-structured interviewing techniques to gather secondary data. These informants were interviewed to collect supporting information about the types and categories of local knowledge that the villagers continue to apply. The demographic backgrounds of the informants are displayed in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Demographic background of informants.

Informant	Demographic background							
	Gender	Age	Religion	Education	Occupation	Status	Leadership position	Residential village
1	Female	28	Islam	Secondary school	Farmer	Widow	None	Bah Renyis
2	Male	58	Baha'i	None	Farmer	Married	None	Bah Renyis
3	Female	59	Islam	None	Farmer	Widow	None	Telimau
4	Male	53	No religion	Standard 3	Farmer	Married	Batin	Telimau
5	Female	30	Islam	Secondary school	Housewife	Married	None	Pos Lemoi
6	Male	61	Islam	Primary school	Self-employment	Married	Batin	Pos Lemoi

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Overview of Local Wisdom among Indigenous Communities

The literature review highlights diverse categories of local wisdom practiced by Indigenous peoples, including handicraft skills, leadership, medicine, social systems, philosophy and worldview, and soft skills. These categories encompass cultural practices, knowledge systems, and skills passed down through generations (Abas, Aziz, & Awang, 2022; Choo, Lim, & Tan, 2025; Jamal et al., 2020; Jamilah et al., 2024; Majid & Rosali, 2025; Regina et al., 2019; Zulkefli, Md, & Mohd, 2025). Here is an example of that category's type:

1. Handicraft Skills

- a. Weaving and crafting weapons: creating animal traps, arrows, blowpipes.
- b. Coconut Leaf Crafts: Making accessories for traditional dances such as the *Sivang* dance (e.g., braiding coconut leaves).
- c. Basketry and Mats: Using rattan, *mengkuan*, or screw pine leaves for baskets and mats.
- d. Animal traps: Constructing snares from ropes for trapping pigs and goats; bamboo traps designed to injure or capture animals; rattan and iron traps for chickens and pigs.

2. Philosophy and Worldview

- a. Language: Indigenous language transmission across generations.
- b. Music and Dance: Performing traditional dances during illness or celebrations; singing songs like *Jenulak*, which narrate dreams of mythical figures.
- c. Metaphors: Descriptive comparisons such as "white like a flower" or "hard like iron."
- d. Taboos: Restrictions such as prohibiting sick individuals from entering the village or visiting others, and cultural rules around menstruation and death rituals.

- e. Customs: Marriage practices, e.g., marriage upon cohabitation; death rituals involving dressing the body in usual clothes and grave offerings.

3. Social System

Kinship and Family Terms: Specific terms for family members, e.g., grandfather (ajom), grandmother (jajak), father (apak/abek), mother (amek/mak), children (kenon), and other kinship designations.

4. Leadership

Hierarchy: leadership roles such as *Tok Batin*, Deputy *Batin* (spouse), and village representatives (tandil).

5. Medicine

- a. Incantations: Dream-based incantations performed by shamans to treat fever and possession.
- b. Maternal Care: Use of midwives during childbirth; postpartum diet restrictions, including avoiding chicken and meat, and consuming boiled fish or tubers.
- c. Herbal Medicine: Use of various plant-based remedies, such as hibiscus leaves for cough and *Tongkat Ali* for stomach ailments.
- d. Medicine Formulations: Preparing herbal decoctions from riverbank trees or native plants to treat fever and other ailments.

6. Soft Skills

- a. Hunting and Tracking: Hunting squirrels and animals using blowpipes; tracking monkeys.
- b. Cooking: Preparing rice, fish, and vegetables in bamboo; learning cooking techniques through observation.
- c. Farming: Cultivating crops such as pumpkins, chili, petai, mangosteen, longan, durian, cassava, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and corn.

5.2. Case Study: Local Wisdom of the Semai Community

Orang Asli culture, especially that of the Semai community, is a rich tapestry of traditional knowledge, skills, and beliefs that have been nurtured and maintained over many generations. Their artisan abilities, such as braiding, craftsmanship, animal trapping, and weaponry making, are one notable category. For example, informants 1 and 4 have observed that rattan is expertly woven into baskets, *mengkuang* or screw pine leaves are used to make mats, and braiding coconut leaves into accessories for the *siwang* dance is a noteworthy specialty. According to informants 4 and 5, bamboo is also used to make *bubu* or fish traps, which are a crucial part of their survival operations. Informants 2 and 4 emphasize the significance of blowguns used for small game hunting, demonstrating how craftsmanship extends into the creation of weapons like arrows and blowguns. Another essential component of their ancient techniques is animal traps. According to informants 1 and 2, pigs and goats are caught using snares made out of ropes. They demonstrate their inventiveness in hunting techniques by using bamboo traps buried in the ground to act as landmines, which are sharp items intended to harm or trap animals. Furthermore, the society distinguishes between large animal traps, known as *belantik* or *ranjau*, and smaller traps, known as *bakok*, *kedik*, *sap*, *jenlek*, and *tilong*, made of rattan and iron for pigs and chickens (informants 5 and 6).

Their worldview and philosophy are heavily reliant on language, with the Semai language being passed down formally and orally from generation to generation. While all of the informants agree that this linguistic tradition is essential to their cultural identity, some, like informant 6, observe that youngsters are using their language less frequently due to modern influences. Additionally, their songs, singing, and dance, which serve both ceremonial and celebratory purposes, powerfully depict their cultural expression. For instance, informants 1 and 2 reported that bamboo instruments that produce musical sounds accompany the *siwang* dance, performed when a patient has an incurable disease. Their storytelling, history, and spiritual connection are demonstrated by the songs they sing during celebrations, such as *Jenulak*, which narrates the story of a mountain princess (informant 4). According to informant 4, the community often incorporates metaphors into speech and music, such as "white like a flower" (*bijek macam bunga*) or "hard like iron" (*cegeh macam besi*), to express attributes and feelings. According to informant 6, the

Orang Asli Semai community has a two-line pantun that is frequently used to address impetuous people: "Cak jerock cak beleng, ga benrock ga kenreng." They also base their worldview on their cultural taboos and conventions. For instance, it is forbidden for sick people to visit or enter the village because doing so may exacerbate their condition; if someone is unwell within, their homes may even be demolished (informant 2). During particular times, such as 100 days following death, certain behaviors, like singing or wearing jewelry, are prohibited until taboos are abolished, and women who are menstruating are prohibited from eating with others (informants 2, 3, and 4). Marriage customs are simple but culturally significant: a couple is deemed married if they have shared a bed, and traditional *merisik* (to seek in marriage) entails bringing a symbolic object, like a *songkok* or handkerchief, and if rejected, a modest payment of 60 cents is required (informants 1, 2, and 3). Offerings may be left on the grave for up to 100 days, and the body may be dressed in its customary clothing and buried after one or two days (informants 1, 2, and 4). The social structure places a strong emphasis on kinship and familial bonds, and it uses terminology for family members that strengthen social bonds. For instance, the terms "ajom" and "jajak" denote grandfather, grandmother, father, and mother, respectively. Children are referred to as *kenon*, and *abah* (uncle) and *wak* (aunt) are essential familial relationships in their society. According to Informant 6, close friendships are defined by the idea of *kenasih*, which reflects the sharing of pleasures and sufferings and promotes communal resilience. The Semai community is hierarchically structured in terms of leadership, with positions such as deputy *Batin* and *Tok Batin* who are often the oldest and most esteemed members possessing expertise in traditional arts, including the composition of *sivang* songs. According to informants 3, 4, 5, and 6, the *Tok Batin* is a social and spiritual leader who embodies knowledge and experience that support traditional values and mediate disputes within the community. Their healthcare system is heavily reliant on traditional treatment methods. Some incantations are learned only by non-Muslim members of the community (informants 1, 4, 5, and 6). Incantations are used to heal fever and possession and are frequently performed by shamans using the Semai language. According to informant 1, mothers look for midwives during labour, and postpartum diets prioritize cooked fish and tubers over chicken or pork. Herbal medicine is frequently employed; for instance, hibiscus leaves are brewed to cure coughs, and water extracts and the root of Tongkat Ali (sometimes called Long Jack) are used to treat gastrointestinal problems (informants 2 and 3). Additional treatments include *cong cerwe* (rattan) for diarrhoea and various plant-based concoctions made from trees that grow in the forest or along riverbanks for colds and fevers (informants 4, 5, and 6). The Semai community's soft skills, which are essential to their survival and cultural preservation, include farming, hunting, tracking, and cooking. In informants 2, 4, 5, and 6, it is common to use blowpipes to hunt squirrels and larger animals, and tracking tactics are employed to hunt boars, tigers, and deer.

Cooking techniques that have been passed down through the years via observation and experience frequently use bamboo containers for rice and soups (informants 1, 2, 5, and 6). The majority of the products they cultivate, including pumpkins, chilli, petai, mangosteen, longan, durian, cassava, sweet potatoes, and vegetables, are grown without the use of pesticides or fertilisers, indicating their sustainable farming methods (informants 1-6).

This discovery indicates that the Semai's traditional knowledge is diverse, ranging from language and craft to spiritual beliefs, social structure, health practices, and subsistence skills. Together, these elements form a complex system of local wisdom that maintains the Semai's cultural identity and resilience in the face of outside influences.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Local Wisdom of the Orang Asli Semai

6.1.1. Handicraft and Soft Skills

According to Siti, Arba'iyah, and Mohammad (2020), weaving is one of the most significant crafts among indigenous groups like the Semai. This craft has evolved into a source of income and a vital part of their cultural identity. The primary materials used include *pandan* leaves and rattan, alongside coconut leaves, to create functional and symbolic items. The Semai community takes pride in their weaving techniques, including the creation of

tampuk, a headdress fashioned from tree bark. This headdress is reserved for the village leader and is worn during official duties, such as greeting visitors or politicians. The Semai believe that only individuals possessed by the tiger spirit those who can hear the roar of a tiger even without its presence are capable of making a *tampuk*, symbolizing spiritual strength and authority. The community is also skilled in weaving bamboo, known as *kelarai*, which is used for constructing house walls. Additionally, blowpipes, another traditional craft, are crafted from lightweight bamboo such as *sewor* and *temiang* (Adi, Hood, & Rashid, 2006). These blowpipes are used for hunting small game such as deer, monkeys, wild boars, and squirrels. Woods like *Manggis Hutan* and *Penaga* are also employed in blowpipe construction (Siti, & Seow, 2013). Abdul and Mat (2021) highlight that the Orang Asli's mastery in creating these tools reflects their intricate knowledge of forest resources and traditional craftsmanship.

Beyond hunting, the Orang Asli are adept at constructing traps for hunting and pest control, with the design tailored to the environment and target animals, whether for food, medicine, or clothing made from animal bones and skins (Muhammad & Mohd, 2020). Rouzbeh, Fatimah, Siti, and Siti (2014) emphasize that indigenous peoples possess profound knowledge of forest ecosystems, wildlife, rivers, agriculture, and traditional medicine. They manage natural resources based on three core principles:

- i. Collective ownership, akin to the Semai concept of *caksamak* ("eating together"), where produce such as vegetables, hunted animals, or fish is shared among neighbors.
- ii. Respect for divine ownership, acknowledging that all natural resources belong to the Creator.
- iii. Land and biodiversity are integral to identity, with elders responsible for passing down sustainable resource management and conservation practices.

The Semai practice small-scale farming and hunting in areas close to their villages, engaging in arboriculture by sowing and caring for forest and settlement trees to promote healthy growth (Hean-Chooi, Elley, & Pozi, 2012). They predominantly utilize wild plant species such as climbing plants, herbs, and trees many of which are consumed raw, cooked, or fermented, including ginger, fruits, grains, leafy vegetables, stems, shoots, and tubers.

6.1.2. Worldview and Cultural Values

Nik Haslinda (2017) asserts that the Semai worldview encompasses social norms such as taboos, customs, and cultural principles that influence behavior from childhood. These principles are often unwritten but universally understood, guiding individuals to avoid violations that could disrupt social harmony or spiritual well-being. Such worldview principles enable the Semai to develop high ideals that promote safety and prosperity on a broader scale.

6.1.3. Cultural Expressions and Rituals

The *siwang* dance, involving *jenulak* (songs) and *ngengsaak* (dance), is a prominent cultural practice that has gained recognition (Nik Haslinda, 2017; Norlida, 2018). Clare and Zaharul (2016) explain that *Jenulak* encapsulates knowledge of flora, fauna, and supernatural beliefs within the rainforest ecosystem. The dance serves multiple purposes: entertainment, romantic courtship, marriage, worship of the rice spirit, and healing. Typically performed after harvest, the *Siwang* dance celebrates community happiness during special occasions like weddings or the New Year. Over time, the themes of *siwang* ceremonies have evolved, with Edo (2006) noting that their songs now also serve to spread knowledge, reinforce identity, foster national pride, and promote unity while still maintaining their traditional significance. The healing *siwang* is performed over six consecutive nights in a secluded space, where no visitors are allowed until the ritual concludes. The Semai practice two main types: *Siwang Kebut*, performed during illness, childbirth, death, or after natural calamities, and *Siwang Asik*, which functions as entertainment, welcoming guests, celebrating the New Year, or honoring spirits that sustain life (Norlida, 2018). Both involve dancing, singing, and music, with instruments such as bamboo *centung* and *rebana* playing crucial roles. Offerings musical instruments, clothing, fragrant plants are essential for the ceremony's success, as music and flora are believed to attract guardian spirits and facilitate their presence.

6.1.4. Dance Forms

Tok Hala' leads the *sivang* dance, involving five to ten dancers of both genders (Nik Haslinda, 2017). Clare (2023) notes that the community highly values the ability to become a *hala'*, a shaman who receives *jenulak* through dreams from the *gunik* (spirit). The dance features various formations, such as line, circle, paired, or group arrangements, with the main vocalist an elder guiding the chorus. Dancers often wear jewelry made from dried coconut leaves, which are hung on walls or thrown into water bodies after drying, respecting taboos that forbid burning or stepping on these decorations, as doing so is believed to cause illness or madness.

The *sivang* dance is usually performed late at night or early morning and is transmitted orally across generations (Clare & Valerie, 2015). The music, instrumental and vocal, reinforces cultural ideals concerning gender roles, social responsibility, and egalitarian community life.

6.1.5. Housing and Spiritual Beliefs

Semai homes are traditionally oriented with the west, north, and south faces aligned with the setting sun, deliberately avoiding the east. This positioning reflects spiritual beliefs that guardians are present in every corner of the world. The community also observes a custom of not sleeping at dusk, believing that during this time, *kermoij* a Malay ghost awakes and searches for food (Ahmad & Abdul, 2010; Juli, 1993). Sleeping during this period is thought to make one susceptible to becoming a servant of the *kermoij*, risking spiritual dislocation and illness. Mothers are advised to hold their children during bedtime to prevent spirits from causing harm.

6.2. How Can Muslim Preachers Effectively Engage Indigenous People in Da'wah by Incorporating and Respecting Local Wisdom?

Preachers have a vital responsibility to disseminate Islam across all societal strata, including indigenous groups that possess distinct traditions, cultures, and beliefs (Abdul Ghafar, 2025). To communicate effectively, preachers must understand and utilize local wisdom as a central communication tool (Nur Damia, 2017). According to Syamsul et al. (2024), local wisdom holds significant value within *da'wah* jurisprudence (*fiqh al-da'wah*), emphasizing its role in contextualizing religious outreach. Abdul (2018) advocates for culture-based or cultural *da'wah*, which involves conveying Islamic teachings by respecting and integrating community-specific social realities, including their cultural practices. This approach aligns with the concept of *da'wah bi al-hikmah* the method of preaching with wisdom where local knowledge and cultural values serve as instruments to harmonize Islamic principles with indigenous traditions (Abdul, 2022).

6.2.1. Strategies for Preachers to Engage the Orang Asli Community Using Local Wisdom

Preachers can adopt a variety of strategies to effectively engage with the Orang Asli community by leveraging local wisdom within their *da'wah* efforts:

6.2.1.1. Understanding, Respecting, and Appreciating Local Wisdom

According to Don et al. (2025), preachers must first familiarize themselves with the language, culture, traditions, and beliefs of indigenous peoples. Demonstrating respect and admiration for their unique identities fosters trust and openness, creating a conducive environment for dialogue. Such an approach shows that Islam can complement, rather than threaten, their existing way of life. Muhammad and Abdul (2019) emphasize that local wisdom should be employed as long as it does not conflict with Islamic teachings, impair reason, cause harm, or oppose *Shari'ah* norms. Abdul (2018) further explains that Islam seeks to assimilate its teachings into local cultures without eradicating pre-existing cultural values, as many virtues such as justice, honesty, and respect are compatible with Islamic principles (Abdul, 2022). This perspective underscores that cultural practices rooted in

sincerity and morality can be harmonized with Islamic values, making *da'wah* more culturally sensitive and effective.

6.2.1.2. *Linking Islamic Values with Local Wisdom*

Islamic teachings resonate with many moral and ethical principles found in local knowledge such as honesty, mutual aid, respect, and environmental stewardship (Panggih & Hamzah, 2024). Preachers can emphasize these shared virtues to foster understanding and acceptance of Islamic principles. For instance, Islamic perspectives on environmental preservation align closely with indigenous environmental ethics, providing common ground for dialogue. Islam encourages the integration of local wisdom that aligns with its core values, while also advocating for the reform or rejection of cultural elements that contradict Islamic teachings (Abu, 2022). Tomi, Siti, and Kori (2023) highlighting that respecting and preserving indigenous knowledge, especially those promoting justice and morality, is vital for successful *da'wah*, as it demonstrates respect for cultural diversity and shared human ideals.

6.2.1.3. *Using Symbols and Traditional Stories*

Preachers can utilize local symbols, folktales, and cultural stories to communicate Islamic messages. Folklore representing community identity and worldview (Siti & Jama'yah, 2013) often contains moral lessons that can be reinterpreted to align with Islamic teachings. Mohd (2017) found that indigenous folktales embody values such as peace, honesty, respect, and social responsibility, which serve as effective tools for *da'wah* when presented through engaging storytelling. A skilled preacher who understands the native language and cultural narratives can incorporate positive elements into these stories, making Islamic messages more relatable and acceptable within the community.

6.2.1.4. *Involving Local Figures and Community Leaders*

Collaborating with respected local figures such as community elders, traditional chiefs, or religious leaders can significantly enhance *da'wah* effectiveness (Halim, Muhammad, Zulkefli, Mustafa, & Abdul, 2022). These individuals, trusted by their communities, act as ambassadors of the message, influencing acceptance and understanding. Dewa, Nasih, and Kurniawan (2024) describe such involvement as a form of social capital building trust, shared values, and relationships that foster community cohesion. Engaging leaders in *da'wah* initiatives helps create a supportive environment for dialogue, facilitating the integration of Islamic values into local social structures.

6.2.1.5. *Organizing Activities and Programs Based on Local Wisdom*

Preachers can organize culturally relevant events such as religious gatherings, environmental projects, or informal dialogues that resonate with the community's traditions (Jamilah & Engku, 2017). These activities serve as platforms for introducing Islamic teachings within familiar contexts. For example, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) has implemented programs like the "Da'wah and Friendly Visit," which foster genuine relationships through visits and community engagement (Muhammad & Nawi, 2025). Such initiatives should be tailored to local customs and aim to foster positive interactions, making the message of Islam more relevant and less alien. Programs that respect local practices and involve community participation are more likely to promote acceptance and facilitate the integration of Islamic values into daily life.

7. CONCLUSION

An effective approach to engaging the Orang Asli community in *da'wah* is to incorporate local wisdom as a central theme in communication strategies. Success in this endeavor depends on preachers maintaining an open mind, gaining a deep understanding of the community's culture, and relating Islamic teachings to their everyday

experiences. When religious outreach is conducted with civility and cultural sensitivity, efforts to promote religious awareness and foster harmonious relationships are more likely to succeed.

Preachers can significantly enhance both the theoretical framework and practical application of *da'wah* by integrating local wisdom into their outreach. The methods of incorporating local wisdom align with well-established concepts such as communication accommodation, cultural sensitivity, and contextualization. This study provides a case example illustrating how Orang Asli customs such as beliefs, stories, and proverbs serve as effective channels for conveying Islamic values. Moreover, it contextualizes abstract theories, demonstrating their practical applicability and flexibility across diverse cultural settings. This research also contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting how local wisdom can serve as a culturally sensitive communication tool. Such an approach fosters community engagement, as it aligns religious messages with the community's cultural identity, thereby promoting a sense of ownership and respect. This method not only enhances the relatability and acceptance of Islamic teachings but also sustains and elevates Indigenous identities.

Within the framework of *da'wah*, utilizing local knowledge allows preachers to adopt community perspectives, increasing the relevance and receptiveness of Islamic messages. It encourages community ownership of religious teachings while fostering tolerance, reducing cultural conflicts, and promoting unity. Additionally, this strategy offers a model for future *da'wah* efforts targeting marginalized or indigenous populations, emphasizing cultural assimilation and indigenization tactics. Empirical support further underscores the effectiveness of cultural adaptation, suggesting that these approaches can be refined and extended to other indigenous environments. By respecting regional traditions, religious outreach can also foster greater community participation and inclusiveness, strengthening communal bonds. Overall, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of culturally aware *da'wah* strategies rooted in local wisdom and relevant theoretical frameworks. This approach not only advances academic understanding but also provides practical, context-specific methods to improve the efficacy and responsiveness of Islamic communication among the Orang Asli. It highlights the vital roles of respect, cultural relevance, and community empowerment in effective religious outreach, offering valuable insights for scholars, preachers, and policymakers alike.

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