Religious Syncretism among the Semelai Orang Asli Muslims in Sungai Lui Village, Malaysia

Abstract

The Semelai are a proto-Malay Orang Asli tribe settled around Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, Malaysia. Their settlements in Negeri Sembilan are in Sungai Lui village and Sungai Sampo village in Jempol. A few of their number also settled in some areas in Bera, Pahang. A majority of this community still adhere to ancestral faiths, although some have converted to Islam since the 1990s. At the same time, practices introduced by a Buddhist shaman took root among the community over the last thirteen years. This article discusses the religious beliefs and practices of this community, especially among Muslim adherents. The study uses a qualitative approach through data collection via interviews with key informants in Sungai Lui village, Jempol. The data were later analysed through a descriptive interpretive method, and the research found that syncretism spread among the belief practices of the Semelai Muslims in Sungai Lui village following the exploits of a Buddhist shaman that succeeded in curing the chronic disease of a villager. At the same time, they still practise inherited customs and wisdoms from animist times, even after their conversion to Islam.

Keywords: Orang Asli; Semelai; syncretism; culture; religion; Malaysia.
**Introduction**

According to its Federal Constitution, Malaysia recognizes Islam as its official religion, while other religions can still exist and practise within the confines stated in the Constitution. The acknowledgement of the Malaysian Constitution on religious diversity is clear in Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution (1957). In Article 11 of the Federal Constitution (1957), freedom of religion is clearly outlined, and each person has the right to observe and practise their respective faiths (Federal Constitution 2006). However, this religious freedom is not without an agenda, and is situated to prevent social disharmony. Therefore, Article 11(5) imposes limits on freedom of religion by preventing acts contrary to any general law related to public order, public health or morality. In addition, Article 11(4) states that State Law and Federal Law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine among persons professing the religion of Islam. At the same time, one’s beliefs and practices are also protected under Article 12(3), which states, “No person shall be required to receive instruction in or to take part in any ceremony or act of worship of a religion other than his own”. Meanwhile, Article 12(4) protects children, declaring that the religion of a person under the age of eighteen years shall be decided by their parent or guardian (Federal Constitution 2006). One could argue that the Federal Constitution of Malaysia sought to promote the sanctity of Islam and reduce the introduction of “polluting” elements to Islam, such as syncretism among Muslims. However, this protection does not occur among non-Muslim religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. Religions aside from Islam, in the Malaysian context, are not accorded official status, and do not enjoy official oversight of their sanctity by the Government of Malaysia. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are decided by the adherents of these traditions.

The Orang Asli (“original people”) in Malaysia are an indigenous minority that lives in the hinterlands. Their lives are very moderate, and their economic activities centre around agriculture, hunting and fishing. They also receive a significant amount of attention by the government, who aim to improve their livelihood, especially in terms of education and economics. In general, the Orang Asli still observe animism. A minority has converted to Islam due to the efforts of religious authorities in the country. Nevertheless, the Orang Asli still strongly retain their inherited beliefs and customs, and resist worldviews that contradict their own. These animist beliefs are strongly embedded in their identity and difficult to extricate, especially among the elder generation. The belief in the spirit world is still strong among the Orang Asli (Syed Hussin 2009). This can be observed from the data of religious beliefs issued by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development recorded up to December 2017. The data shows that around 40.96 per cent of
all Orang Asli people in Negeri Sembilan, or 4,314 out of 10,531, still profess ancestral animistic beliefs. This also explains the difficulty in convincing them to abandon their old faith, even with the ongoing missionary efforts of around fifty years via various government agencies and Islamic institutions with ample funding and comfortable living facilities.

Due to these factors, Muslim missionaries preaching among the Orang Asli have been tolerant of some ancestral cultural aspects of these people, even those influenced by animism. In a study by Nordin Ahmad (1998) on preaching Islam to the Orang Asli Temuan in Selangor, among the issues of concern for these people are their observed taboos. They are open to Islam, but hesitant to abandon their taboos, due to concerns of calamities that might occur if these taboos were broken. This situation indirectly gives rise to the syncretic phenomenon within the Orang Asli belief and cultural practices. Therefore, this study aims to measure the extent syncretism occurs among the Orang Asli Muslims in Sungai Lui village, Jempol, Negeri Sembilan.

The Concept of Syncretism

According to Kraft (2002), religious syncretism is defined as the blending of religious ideas and practices through the adoption of certain principles, or amalgamating both in a more cosmopolitan and less polytheistic shape. In discussing the use of syncretism, there are, broadly speaking, two main schools of thought. The first school aims to avoid descriptive evaluation, while the second emphasizes normative evaluation. This further adds to confusion in understanding the concept of syncretism, as both schools use the same words for their very different studies (Zehner 2005).

Adherents of the first school associate syncretism with hybridity. They prefer a more inclusive definition, suggesting that syncretism is a natural process in traditions concerned with defending their purity, as explained in Shaw and Stewart (1994). Pye (1971: 93) defines syncretism as “the temporary ambiguous co-existence of elements from diverse religious and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern” and explains the presence of tension between the amalgamated elements (living with multiple identities) and religious dogmas. As this school uses a meaning equivalent to hybridity, some scholars are more comfortable with the term “hybrid” to refer to the adoption of foreign elements into a belief system. This term is seen as more positive and harmonious; foreign elements are incorporated without altering the natural traits of the faith. In time, this adoption process will merge with the existing beliefs, transforming the belief system from its original form. This situation is much in line with the dynamic nature of human
belief practices. Pattana Kitiarsa (2005), for instance, puts forth this hybridization concept to explain the development of Buddhism in Thailand, as he viewed syncretism as outdated and limited in explaining the originality of a faith. In essence, the religious hybrid concept is a mixture of various elements in beliefs and practices. Kitiarsa gives the example of Buddhism as the popular religion in Thailand, in line with post-modern realities (Kitiarsa 2005).

The adherents of the second school seek to define syncretism in more exclusive terms. Among them include Adolf von Harnack, Karl Barth, Peter Schineller and Robert Schreiter. This approach is largely conducted from a Christian perspective, using the term to refer to a intermingling process that threatens the Christian tradition. This is in line with the efforts of The Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission, which portrays the traditional definition of syncretism as something negative: “the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements” (Zehner 2005). In this regard, the Evangelicals identify syncretism as “too much change”, while simultaneously painting it as a negative trait that “threatens the core of the faith” in regards to the nature of God and Jesus Christ, and the authority of the Bible.

According to Carsten Colpe, the concept of syncretism can be used to describe either the “state” or the “process”. He also explains the traits and categories of syncretic religions, such as the pre-Hellenic mystery cults, Manicheanism, Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, Sikhism and Din Ilahi. For him, syncretic religion occurs at the “state” stage, known also as meta-syncretism. The “process” stage describes the presence of an inclination to become syncretic, or a development that ends with syncretism. However, according to Colpe, the syncretic process in some world religions such as Islam usually ends with the disappearance of syncretism (Colpe 1987). The syncretic process from an Islamic perspective has also been discussed by Mohd Mokhtar (2015; 2018), who explains that in essence, syncretism is frowned upon in Islam. However, it is a natural process occurring within societies in the early stages of conversion. Syncretism in Muslim societies is a “process” that ends with the vanishing of the syncretic elements. In explaining the expendability of syncretism in Islamic praxis and worship, Hamka (2003) and Roham (2009) are both in agreement that Chapter 109: 1–6 of the Quran was revealed to answer the question of syncretism, as essentially prohibited in Islam.

Although the language of hybridity is seen as more up to date and in line with post-modern realities, we are still more inclined to the concept of syncretism, as the use of hybrid as a tool to understand religion is limited by the fact that not all religions can accept foreign elements. Islam, for instance, very strongly rejects foreign elements based on the concept of TAUHID (Divine Oneness). In TAUHID, some
fundamentals are unchangeable, such as the belief in the One God (Allah SWT)\(^1\) without any other association (i.e., the belief in a power other than God, e.g. spirit, that may be beneficial or harmful), and that human worship is only reserved for God. Transforming this fundamental belief negates Islam’s own structure. This belief does not open itself to hybridization with any element antithetical to \textit{Tauhid}. Any element incorporated into Islam should only be cultural, not in conflict with \textit{Tauhid}, as Tauhid is the core concept of Islam. Therefore, \textit{Tauhid} must be maintained in its pure form forever to allow Islam’s own survival. If Islam began incorporating foreign elements adverse to \textit{Tauhid}, either these elements will be gradually dominated by \textit{Tauhid}, or they will dominate \textit{Tauhid}, and the latter situation puts that belief outside the fold of Islam.

There is a dearth of existing studies on syncretism within the context of the Orang Asli in Malaysia. Among the few that exist is by Hwee Sian Ho, “Syncretism among the Temuan People in Kampung Lubuk Bandung, Melaka” (Ho 1994). However, the syncretism advanced by Hwee Sian Ho was in regards to acceptance of Chinese beliefs within Temuan animism. Meanwhile, syncretic studies among Muslims in Malaysia in general have been carried out by a small number of researchers, such as Syamsul Azizul Marinsah’s “Syncretic Elements within the Customs and Traditions of the Bajau Community in Sabah: An Analysis from an Islamic Perspective” (Marinsah 2017), and Ros Aiza Mohd Mokhtar’s study titled “The Concept of Syncretism according to Islamic Perspectives: A Study on the Traditions and Beliefs of the Kedayan Community” (Mohd Mokhtar 2015). An earlier study is Maulana Magiman’s “Syncretism in the Life of the Kadayan in Sarawak” (Magiman 2012), which explains that the \textit{Makan Tahun} festival of the Kadayan manifests a syncretism between Islam and tradition dominated by dynamism-animism. This can be observed with the presence of both Islamic and traditional cultural elements in the activities of \textit{Makan Tahun}. Islamic elements include \textit{solat hajat}, \textit{ratib saman}, \textit{solat dhuha}, reading the \textit{Yasin}, \textit{tahlil} and \textit{doa selamat}. The traditional cultural elements in \textit{Makan Tahun} include \textit{kalupis}, \textit{pakanan raja}, incense sticks, and a \textit{dukun} (shaman). The main roles of the \textit{ustaz} (religious teacher) and the shaman in the \textit{Makan Tahun} ceremony are also explained by Mohamad Suhaidi Salleh (Salleh 2012). The studies by Syamsul Azizul Marinsah, Ros Aiza Mohd Mokhtar, Maulana Magiman and Mohamad Suhaidi Salleh focus on the natives of Sabah and Sarawak, who still cling strongly to their ancestral customs even after their conversion to Islam. Their findings show a similar situation, with syncretism increasingly rejected the deeper their understanding of Islam.

\(^1\) SWT is an abbreviation of \textit{Subhanahu wa ta'ala}, which is Arabic for “The most glorified, the most high”.

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The Background of the Orang Asli in Malaysia

The Orang Asli are an indigenous, Bumiputera-status people in Peninsular Malaysia. They are categorized into three main groups: the Negrito, Senoi and the Proto-Malay. Each group consists of six tribes. The Negrito tribes include the Ken-siu, Kintak, Lanoh, Jahai, Mendriq and Bateq. The Senoi tribes are the Che Wong, Mahmeri, Jahut, Semq Beri, Semai and Temiar. Meanwhile, the Proto-Malay tribes include the Kuala, Kanaq, Seletar, Jakun, Semelai and Temuan. The classifications are made based on physical appearance, language and ways of life (Mohd Jelas, Ahmad and Ayudin 2009).

The Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia have attracted the interest of many researchers from within and outside the country, and their studies cover a variety of aspects in the lives of the Orang Asli from multiple groups and areas. Among this research are the historiography of the Orang Asli (Benjamin and Chou 2003), economic activities and development impacting the Orang Asli (Ayudin, Ahmad and Mohd Yasin 2009), and the diverse social aspects that cover language (Omar 1998), education (Mat Nor 2009), belief systems and cultural praxis (Muhamad Salleh 1974, 1975; Gianno 2016). There are also studies on preaching Islam among the Orang Asli (Mokhtar and Aini 2014). Specific studies on the Semelai Orang Asli people have also been carried out by a number of researchers, focusing on aspects such as the identity, worldview and culture of the Semelai (Muhamad Salleh 1974, 1975; Gianno 1997; Ban Seng 2001; Mohamad 2010), Semelai language (Kruspe 2004; Azmi 2015), Semelai economic activities (Abdul Jamak et al. 2003) and Semelai local talent, especially in astronomy (Jaafar and Khairuddin 2019).

Significantly, virtually all previous studies on the Semelai were conducted around the Tasik Bera area, Pahang, which still strongly holds on to their ancestral animist beliefs. Therefore, this study offers an added value in Semelai Orang Asli studies, as it focuses on the Semelai that settled in Sungai Lui village, and especially the people who have converted to Islam. Even though Sungai Lui village is located near the Pahang border, not far from Tasik Bera, there are some observable differences between the Tasik Bera Semelai and the Sungai Lui Semelai, who both still observe animistic beliefs. The latter are also influenced by the Pepatih custom as practised by the majority of Negeri Sembilan residents, as well as the influence of a Buddhist shaman believed to have cured a villager of a chronic and unidentified illness (Harun Junus, personal communication, February 23, 2019). Aside from discussing the Semelai, who have not been approached by previous scholars, there is also a dearth of studies on syncretism among the Orang Asli Muslims. This study puts forth a different finding within the context of syncretic studies among Muslims in Malaysia. Hitherto syncretic studies among Muslims in Malaysia generally refer to a “process” undergoing a gradual reduction, while Islam is predicted to dominate and
eliminate “polluting” syncretic elements to the faith (Colpe 1987; Mohd Mokhtar 2015). However, our data shows that syncretism among Semelai Muslims increased with the spread of a Buddhist shaman that successfully healed a villager of their chronic illness. This situation requires further study.

The Background of the Semelai Orang Asli

The Semelai are defined by Baharom (2005) as an indigenous group in Peninsular Malaysia from the Proto-Malay group that settled in either Central Pahang (Tasik Bera, Sungai Teriang, Paya Besar and Paya Badak) or near the Pahang border heading towards Negeri Sembilan (Sungai Serting, Sungai Lui and Ulu Muar). According to Gianno (1997), the name “Semelai” may originate from the Orang Asli word “slaay”, which means “a swidden area cleared through slashing and burning plants”. Meanwhile, “smlaay” means “those who clear temporary farming plots through slashing and burning plants”. Furthermore, the word “Semelai” is not limited to the Semelai Orang Asli group; it was the arrival of H. D. Collings in Tasik Bera in the 1940s that began to refer to them specifically as the Semelai. In addition, the Semelai are also called the “Semaq Tasik” or the “Orang Tasik”, alluding to their settlement around Tasik Bera (Abdul Jamak et al. 2010). The Semelai are categorized within the Proto-Malay group, while the Semelai language is categorized within the Austroasiatic Mon-Khmer language family (Benjamin 1976) and is not a branch of the Austronesian language family, as are the languages of the five Proto-Malay ethnic groups: the Temuan, Jakun, Kanak, Seletar and Duano (Azmi 2015).

The Semelai based their cultural identity and a large part of their cosmology on the perception of their affinity with the Malays and the Temeq. In one story, they identify themselves as the brothers to the Temeq; the result of the union of a Semelai woman and a Temeq man. As regards the Malay, in one story they are described as being in the same group, while in another, the leader of the Semelai and the Malay are said to have been brothers. One story that self-identifies the Semelai as the brother of the Temeq is the “tale of the circumcised one”. This story is about two brothers who lost their parents and lived in the forest. The younger brother invited his elder brother to leave the forest and go to a nearby Malay village to be circumcised. The elder agreed, and when they reached their destination, the elder asked the younger to be circumcised first. Seeing the blood that flowed from the ritual, the elder fled to the forest and remained uncircumcised. Therefore, the uncircumcised one is known as the Temeq, while the circumcised is the Semelai. In another tale, a man named Tembeling kept a tiger as his pet, which he used to hunt mouse-deer, deer and wild boar. Usually, the tiger was fed cooked game meat. One day, while out hunting, Tembeling was bitten by a leach. Tembeling wiped off the blood with his finger and smeared it on his pet
tiger’s lips. The tiger licked the blood and, having a taste of his master’s blood, then proceeded to devour him. The tiger returned to Tembeling’s house and ate his master’s wife and children. The tiger then turned its attention to the villagers. Only two women survived, and they fled to Sungai Serting where they hid in a drum in a house for months. After a few moons passed, two Temoq men, carrying blowpipes and spears, approached the two Semelai women and helped to kill the tiger. At the conclusion of the story, the two Semelai women married the two Temoq men (Gianno 1997).

The story that links the Semelai to the Malay has a number of versions. In the version recorded by Muhamad Salleh (1974), the Semelai and the Malay came to Malaya from Sumatra (a place called Pagar Ruyong) as one group, and separated after residing for a time near a mountain named Gunong Penrinoh. During a feast in the area, the Semelai stayed indoors, while the Malay sat on the veranda. This explains why the Semelai (or Orang Asli in general) are called the orang dalam (inland people) while the Malays are known as the orang luar (outside people). While feasting, the Malays requested large amounts of food from the Semelai indoors. The Semelai rejected the request, and the Malays became angry and decided to no longer eat Semelai food, and they separated. After they went their separate ways, the Semelai crossed a wide river on a fallen tree trunk. The Batin (the title used for a leader or headman in the Orang Asli community including the Semelai) carried with him a scroll containing their genealogy and placed it on his head. However, upon hearing a cock crow, the Batin lifted his head and the scroll fell into the water. Afterwards, the Batin stored their lineage in his mind. This explains why the Semelai and other Orang Asli tribes have no written system.

In the tale “Sultan, Penghulu, and Batin”, the leaders of the Malay and Semelai (or Orang Asli in general) are described as brothers. It was said that three out of forty-four children of Adam descended from heaven to this world, and slid down a rope. The youngest of them wore a yellow sarong and a songkok (cap). The middle brother also wore a songkok. While sliding down, a strong wind blew and the three were carried away by the wind. The rope later snapped and they fell to the earth. The youngest brother fell in a standing position, and was called the Raja (Sultan). The middle fell in a kneeling position, and was called the Penghulu, or village headman. Both of them were Malays. The oldest brother fell in a sitting position, and was called the Batin. In this story, the Semelai Batin was depicted as the older brother of the Malay Sultan (Gianno 1997). Meanwhile, in Muhamad Salleh’s version of the tale (1974), there were only two brothers, with the younger becoming Sultan and the elder becoming Batin.

According to the Department of Orang Asli Development (2019), the Semelai were seen as somewhat similar to the Malay. According to the data collected from
JAKOA, the Semelai tribe in Peninsular Malaysia number around 7,727 people. Around 4,769 Semelai residents are located in Pahang, followed by Negeri Sembilan (2,464 residents), Perak (229 residents), Selangor (222 residents), Johor (38 residents), Melaka (3 residents) and Kelantan (2 residents). The data here clearly shows that the Semelai tribe mainly reside in Pahang and Negeri Sembilan.

The Semelai Tribe in Sungai Lui Village

The Semelai settlement in Sungai Lui is close to the Malay settlement of Sungai Lui village (Sungai Lui Felda). There is an estimated 1,600 Semelai in Sungai Lui village, with around 121 houses (Abdul Razak Manap, personal communication, August 14, 2019). A majority of the community still adheres to animist beliefs, while a small number converted to Islam in the 1990s (Tanda Tahir, personal communication, August 14, 2019). At the same time, Buddhist influences penetrated the community around ten years ago (Harun Junus, personal communication, February 23, 2019). Therefore, there is a syncretic element in the belief and cultural practices of these people.

The economic activities practised by all Orang Asli tribes and groups are generally similar, and can be separated into two main categories. The first category is cash-generating economic activities, such as rubber tapping and rattan gathering, while the second category covers subsistence economic activities such as fishing, hunting and farming. Usually, these activities are carried out separately, according to climate and season, the market, and their own inclinations. However, in some situations both economic activities are carried out side by side (Ah Choy et al. 2010). The Semelai Orang Asli in Sungai Lui village is no different. They also cultivate rubber, cocoa, open grocery stores, herd goats, hunt animals, fish and farm (Samsudin Pu, personal communication, February 24, 2019).

The Original Belief System of the Semelai Animists

Generally, the Semelai inherited animistic beliefs from their ancestors. Before we delve into a discussion on Semelai animism, we must define animism. According to Baharom (2005), animism is a belief that everything on earth such as rocks, wood and the wind have a spirit or anima. Edward Burnett Tylor states that animism originates from a Latin word which means spirit, soul or life (Tylor 1871). Graham Harvey defines animism as referring to a primal human belief system centred around spirits and the unseen. These two entities hold considerable influence on the lives of man, and demand such respect as to prevent the spirits from harassing humanity (Harvey 2006).
Animism is still observed by most of the Semelai to this day. To them, every object, tree, rock, river, and so on, contain their own spirits that affect their daily lives. Therefore, in Semelai day-to-day activity, they often emphasize communion with nature. A peaceful and prosperous life can only be achieved if humanity lives in harmony with his environment. They have a close relationship with nature, and they are part of nature as well. They believe the Semelai puyang or pawang (wiseman) has a responsibility to maintain the stability of the universe.

Semelai animism can also be seen from how they view nature and the reality of human existence. According to Muhamad Salleh (1974), the knowledge of natural structures (the existence of the moon, the sun, and man) is known as Sura Alam. This knowledge is orally transmitted from generation to generation. The Semelai believe this world is a spherical realm, surrounded by a sea of foam. Above the earth (ateh) are three layers of the heavens (maling), and below the earth are three layers; the universe contains seven layers overall, including the earth. The shape of the world is maintained by a giant snake or dragon, horned and black-golden, named Sikati Monong. The serpent is nailed in seven different areas at the foot of the sky. The nail becomes loose as sumong (incest) and other vile acts are practised. This causes the position of the “dragon” to change. This change then leads to natural disasters. Therefore, the Puyang as the wiseman of the Semelai, journeys to the spirit world to fasten the loose nail on Sikati Monong.

According to Nurul Fatini Jaafar and Ahmad Hakimi Khairuddin, Sikati Monong wields great influence in the Semalai religion (Jaafar and Khairuddin 2019). Aside from maintaining the shape of the world, the Semelai believe the sun, moon and stars originated from Sikati Monong. Mata’arek (Sun) originated from its right eye, Bulan (moon) from its left, and Bintang (the stars) from its scales. Sikati Monong, once upon a time, transformed into an old hermit seated on a rock. A boy, the incarnation of Tuhan (God), laughed at the old man. The old man became angry and advised the boy to show respect to his elders. The boy countered that he is the elder of the two, sparking a heated argument. The boy challenged the old man to raise the water level to the heavens. The old man answered the challenge, displaying his prowess while the waters flooded the earth. Swiftly, the boy built an ark and sailed towards the old man, gouging out both his eyes. As the waters reached the sky, the boy set the pair of eyes in the firmament, becoming the Mata’arek and Bulan that remained in maling (the sky) to this day. After setting the eyes of the old man in the sky, the boy lowered the water level, until all of ateh (the earth) was dry. The old man felt a great thirst, and begged for mercy from the boy. The boy commanded the old man to drink from the lebak leaf. Unexpectedly, the water from the slit of the lebak leaf flowed freely, irrigating the parched soil. To punish the arrogance of the old man named Sikati Monong, Tuhan nailed him to the foot of the

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heavens. Mata’arek, Bulan and Bintang were initially in the sky at the same time. Bintang are the children of Mata’arek and Bulan. Mata’arek and Bulan each owned a farm: Bulan’s farm was fertile, while the crops in Mata’arek’s farm withered and died. After a while, Mata’arek’s farm was taken over by Bulan, and became fertile. When Bulan visited Mata’arek’s farm later, she was surprised that the same situation occurred again under Mata’arek’s watch. Bulan realized that Mata’arek’s children caused the farm’s environment to overheat. Bulan then deceived Mata’arek with the hope that he would fall for her tricks. Bulan hid her children behind her when she visited Mata’arek. When questioned by Mata’arek on the absence of her children, Bulan proudly declared that she swallowed all her children, and challenged Mata’arek to do the same to his children. Without a second thought, Mata’arek answered Bulan’s challenge. When the last of Mata’arek’s children was devoured, Bulan’s children emerged from their hiding. Mata’arek grew wrathful, and launched a war with Bulan. Tuhan, responsible for the creation of Mata’arek, Bulan and Bintang, stepped in to stop the war. Mata’arek and Bulan (and the other stars) were separated and prohibited from meeting one another. Thereafter, Mata’arek reigns alone in the day, while Bulan is surrounded by thousands of stars in the night sky after the Sun sets. Even though Mata’arek serves as the sole body in the daytime sky due to Bulan’s deception, the moon has ensured the survival of humanity to this day (Muhamad Salleh 1974; Jaafar and Khairuddin 2019).

The Sura Alam of the Semelai clearly described the familiarity between human and nature. Humans, the earth (ateh), the moon (Bulan), the sky (maling), the sun (Mata’arek), and the serpent (Sikati Monong), all live in one universe, interdependent with each other. At the same time, we also witness the huge role the Puyang plays to ensure the stability of the world. However, only those that did not convert to Islam still retain their belief in the Sura Alam. Some of the Semelai, embracing this new faith, no longer believe in the Sura Alam, but accept that the universe, including the earth, sky, moon and sun, were created by God (Allah SWT). Nevertheless, their bond with nature continues, and they would not carelessly do harm to nature, as their livelihood is self-sufficient farming, hunting animals in the forests, and fishing in the rivers. Therefore, old hunting wisdoms are still practised to avoid misfortune. At the same time, the Puyang’s role is now more focused on healing illnesses (Junus Tahir, personal communication, April 13, 2019).

The Syncretic Elements in the Beliefs and Customs of the Semelai Muslims

Syncretism is still a relevant conceptual tool to explain the admixture of elements antithetical to the beliefs of Semelai Muslims. These elements include both the
Tauhid element that underlies the Islamic faith and the practice of veneration as introduced by a Buddhist shaman—the veneration of “datuk tokong” (“datuk” literally means respected old man and “tokong” means temple, but in this case it means “spirit of the temple” that can protect the villagers from calamities), similar to the spirit worship that serves as the basis of animism. This research found that syncretism among the Semelai Muslims in Sungai Lui takes the form of venerating or leaving an offering to the “datuk tokong”. This practice has been carried out annually on February 22nd for the past thirteen years, since 2008. On this day, joss sticks are placed along the road in the village, leading to the temple where the feast is held.

Although there exists a temple in their village, according to Harun Junus (personal communication, February 23, 2019), this does not necessarily indicate the presence of Buddhism among the people; but a practice due to an event that occurred in the community. According to Harun, once upon a time, a villager fell ill and fainted for a few days, and no one could cure him, not even the hospital. In response, the villagers invited a Chinese Buddhist shaman said to be from Melaka to treat the sick man. The Chinese Buddhist shaman successfully healed the patient with spells, and suggested that a temple be built and prayers and feasts held there, to prevent harm from befalling the villagers. Therefore, all villagers, both animist and Muslim, carry out the ritual annually and contribute to the preparations of food for the feast. This is acknowledged by Harun:


[We follow them. We help as well. Many are involved. Every year we bring food. If we don’t bring food, trouble. Every 22 February. It’s almost ten years now. We cook. I buy the ingredients, collect the money. I know everything. Chicken, goat, I buy everything. We prepare the food, let the temple eat first. We collect the money until it’s enough. If you give, you give. We don’t force. I count how many to feed, then I buy the ingredients like chicken and goat. Buy goat, ready-cut at the market; if we don’t give, then it’s not right. He gives RM10, he gives RM10, he gives another RM10, and so on.]

At the same time, there exists a confusion among some members of the Muslim adherents over the identity of the datuk (spirit) that inhabits the temple. This can be observed when it is said the datuk guarding the temple is Muslim, as he wears a songkok and white robe. Therefore, they do not serve non-halal offerings such as
pork to the datuk. Instead, they serve food such as chicken and goat. They believe the temple datuk consumes the food offering, even though physically the food does not dwindle. This is explained by Harun:


[English: His shadow is eating. But it doesn’t decrease. If it’s an orange, no matter how sweet, the moment you place it there, it’s no longer sweet. Like tea, sweet drinks, when you place it there, the taste is gone, it tastes like plain water. Some can see, my grandkids can see. They see someone eating. They’re not scared; they’re used to it. This time, this year, the Datuk wants a goat. The guardian Datuk, the temple Datuk. Those things (pork), he won’t eat. He’s Muslim. The temple is guarded by a Muslim. He is wearing white songkok and white robe. He is an Orang Asli Muslim.]

Aside from the datuk tokong veneration to prevent misfortune among the villagers, there also exists syncretism within the Semelai Muslims, known as the bawak tidur. The bawak tidur tradition is believed to have been practised a long time ago among the Semelai (Abdul Razak Manap, personal communication, August 14, 2019). Even post-conversion to Islam, some of them still practise this custom. According to Junus Tahir (personal communication, April 13, 2019), aside from engagement, this is another way for couples to be married. In this situation, the man brings the woman to his or his parents’ house and the couple sleep together for two nights. On the third night, the woman’s guardians, either the uncle or aunt of the woman, will visit and pass judgement. The woman’s guardian will ask whether the man wants to marry the woman, and they then negotiate with the Batin. The man is fined by the Batin and allowed to marry the woman. However, the man can only bring the woman to his or his parents’ house. If he brings her to stay the night at another house, then the man is fined and prohibited from marrying her. This is because, in their eyes, the man harbours impure intent and has no intention of marrying her. This is explained in detail by Junus Tahir:

Sometimes we have a feast, sometimes we don’t, according to the situation. If we want to marry, there are two ways. Engagement is fine, bawak tidur is also fine. If we promise the woman, we bring her to sleep for two nights, then her guardian comes to “catch” them. The parents cannot catch them. It must be another guardian, like the uncle or aunt of the woman, who catches them on the third night. The guardian asks questions, like why are you sleeping with my niece? He answers that he wants to marry her. She asks again, do you want a feast or not? If in a few months, then a feast. If you want to be engaged, then be engaged. Custom-wise, bawak tidur is allowed. Just don’t bring her everywhere. For instance, bringing her to stay the night in someone else’s house. That’s wrong. Marriage is not allowed. Bring to our house, you can marry. It’s seen as wrong, but marriage can still go on, just have to pay the fine to the Tok Batin. But if your friend’s house has an extra room. We bring a woman to stay the night there, then the guardian catches us. We are fined, but we cannot marry. It shows you don’t want to be married, but just play around.

This practice is objectionable in Islamic teachings, as it dishonours the sanctity of lineage. Bawak tidur (pre-marital sexual relations) is prohibited and a major sin. In other words, the continuation of this custom is a syncretism or “pollutant” to their new Islamic faith.

At the same time, however, there are some wisdoms in the life of the hitherto animist Semelai, especially in regards to health. Some of these wisdoms are not in line with Islamic teachings, but practised by a small number of the Semelai Muslims, leading to syncretism. Among the identified syncretic elements in Semelai wisdom still practised by the Muslim converts in Kampung Sungai Lui is the use of centipedes as medicine or cures for asthma or wheezing. Islam prohibits the consumption of poisonous or venomous creatures like centipedes. Some Muslims still eat centipedes for medicinal purposes, even as they realize it is religiously prohibited. However, they rationalize their decision to consume prohibited things by asking the apothecary to withhold information on the ingredients. This reduces the feeling of guilt, as they do not know better. This is evident in Junus’s statement:


[English: Actually, medicine and spells, the centipede, I say that even though I am Muslim, I went to Mecca, when I had asthma, I ate three. But I told my children, don’t inform me. Feed me secretly. Don’t let me find out. If I found out, then it’s not okay.]

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Figures 1 and 2: Incense sticks placed along the roadside and in the temple area. Source: Field research, personal collection.
Aside from centipedes, the Semelai Muslims also eat newborn rats to reduce body temperature, cure asthma, and wheezing. This is mentioned by Asai Patek (personal communication, April 13, 2019):


[English: But if the whole body is hot, swallow it alive. That’s the cure. For us, we have the red one, the really red one. It’s all right. The moment it’s born, we swallow it. All the better. For the centipede, we cook, and eat one by one, finish the whole thing. It’s medicine. The rat is also medicine.]

The data collected shows the existence of syncretism in the belief and cultural practices of the Semelai Muslims. In the customary practices highlighted here, they are still seen as normal among the new converts. Practices contrary to Islamic teachings such as bawak tidur, and medicinally consuming centipedes and young rats are expected to slowly disappear as the converts gain a deeper understanding of their religion. However, some religious practices as shown here defy expectations. Usually, a society post-conversion will gradually abandon beliefs objectionable to Islam. However, the reverse seems to occur among the Semelai Muslims in
Sungai Lui village. Those who have accepted the Tauhid concept of not associating with other Gods (Allah SWT), have engaged in worship and offering to the datuk tokong idol introduced by a Chinese Buddhist shaman to ensure the safety and harmony of the village. The question then arises: why did this happen? How did a foreign faith, introduced by a Chinese Buddhist shaman, manage to alter their belief system, ever after their conversion to Islam?

We identify a number of contributing factors to this phenomenon. Among them is that the Orang Asli, especially the Semelai, are minorities, marginalized and poor. They are afforded far fewer opportunities to pursue education than the rest of the population, and educational systems often clash with their cultural traditions. They also depend on financial aid from the authorities. When Muslims missionaries invite them to convert to Islam, the accompanying offer of financial aid for their survival is readily accepted. However, this does not translate to an understanding of Islam, as their poverty means that their priority is survival. This is acknowledged by Tanda Tahir (personal communication, August 14, 2019), who states he will not hesitate to leave Islam if financial aid is cut off. At the same time, the miracle displayed by a Chinese Buddhist shaman to heal an incurable disease, beyond the skill of any other individual or hospital, caused the villagers to accept the shaman’s suggestion to build a temple and venerate the temple with an annual feast.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, there exists syncretic elements in the belief system of the Semelai Muslims in Sungai Lui village, through offerings to the datuk tokong, and certain practices and inherited wisdoms not in line with Islamic teachings, such as bawak tidur and consumption of centipedes and young rats as cures for asthma. The findings here differ from previous studies, which generally depict syncretism as a temporary process, as Islam filters pre-Islamic customs and beliefs. However, in the context of the Semelai Muslims, the data shows that post-conversion, other beliefs also make their way into their religious practices. This means the syncretic process cannot be predicted to end with inevitable adherence to Islam, but the reverse, in which syncretic elements will spread so far as to put them out of the fold of Islam. This is believed to occur due to the strong influence of animism within them, the desire to worship something that can bring fortune and prevent misfortune, as introduced by the Buddhist shaman. Therefore, this research requires further study in order to measure the development of syncretism among the community, and to answer the question of which beliefs becomes more dominant and victorious in this clash of elements. If the Islamic elements dominate, this community will retain their Islamic-ness, but if animist and Buddhist practices dominate, then they have regressed to their ancestral convictions.

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