Ethnobotanical Study of Traditional knowledge on Plant Used in Traditional Bath (mandi serom) among Malay Midwives in Perak and Negeri Sembilan

Rashidi Othman¹*, Nur Illani Abdul Razak² and Nooriszai Ishak³

International Institute for Halal Research and Training (INHART), Herbarium Unit, Department of Landscape Architecture, Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environment Design, International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Abstract

This paper analyzed the traditional knowledge of plants used in traditional bath which known as mandi serom in Malay culture. Mandi serom is an important traditional way in postpartum practice among Malay communities in Perak and Negeri Sembilan. The study was carried out through face to face interviews with Malay midwives as the respondents and collection and identification of the plants in the area. A total of 25 species of plants were noted and collected during the botanical surveys. Most of them are predominated by zingibers and herbaceous plants. In mandi serom, the plants are used to get rid the body odour, for spiritual cleansing, for hygienic purposes and to ward off mystical forces known as makhluk halus in Malay culture. Traditional beliefs and practices surrounding postpartum practice were highly prevalent among young women in Malay culture. However this traditional knowledge is seldom recorded and only passed down through generations. Therefore these new ethnobotanical records are a rich source towards preservation of traditional knowledge of plants that can be further up for clinical studies in Malaysia.

Keywords— Malay Midwifery, and scape Ethnobotany, Traditional Bath, Malay Culture.

Introduction

Water is beliefs to be a vital and sacred origin of life. It is regarded as an essential element in traditional healing, both practically and symbolically (Rinne, 2001). Traditional bathing in Malay culture means a total body bath, from head to toe. It is designated for specific purpose and occasion, mainly conducted by the midwives (bidan kampung). Midwife (bidan kampung) in Malay culture often an old respected skillful woman who holds the highest place in the community and seen as specialist doctor in attending childbirth, assisting woman and advising young lady. They normally get knowledge through matrineally transmission,
along the female line, from either mother to daughter or grandmother to granddaughter. This knowledge is regarded as sacred and esoteric (Karim, 1984). Midwifery practice was primarily among traditional peoples with limited access to biomedicine. However, today it is also practiced in Western societies as an alternative to biomedicine and continues to play an important role in providing health care to women and children (Arvigo & Balick, 1993; Barrett, 1994; Bhuyan, 1994; Bourdy & Walter, 1992; Browner, 1985; Coe, 2008; Coe & Anderson, 1996; Liulan, Nanakorn, & Fukui, 2003; Luisier, 1985; Parra, 1993; Viisainen, 1992).

As in postpartum practice, Malay traditional bath (mandi serom) is the essential part in afterbirth recovery that involved selected plant species chose by the midwives together with the taboos (pantang-larang) that must be complied during the bathing ceremony (Ishak, 2012). Malay culture believes in the concept that illnesses are the consequence of physical as well as supernatural causes. Supernatural causes include a wide variety of malevolent spirits (hantu), witchcraft and supernatural aura that emanate from slain animals and men (badi) and reflect the Malay cultural concept of the “universe” (Chen, 1981; OSMAN, 1972).

During the postnatal treatment and care, the newborn mothers are encouraged to perform mandi serom starting from the second day after labour with lukewarm water two times daily, morning and evening. They need to practice this mandi serom continuously for 3 days until the end of postnatal confinement week. About 7 to 21 types of plants will be used throughout the mandi serom practice. The number of plants used must be odd, such as 7, 9, 11, 13, 15 or 21. All the plants involved in mandi serom will be gathered by the midwife who normally plants them around her house. She will clean the plants and put them into boil. The boiling water of herbal plants then will be poured into a large basin and water will be added and mix. Before performing mandi serom, midwife will recite some prayer over the water and the newborn’s mother is ready to take her bath.

Mandi serom is one of the spiritual treatments as rejuvenation therapy for a newborn mother. Most of the newborn mothers are always under-pressured, experience stress disorder, low self confident and esteem, always nervous and other psychological effect. Therefore the practice of traditional bath (mandi serom) is important to refresh the newborn mother’s mood, rejuvenate the body as well as calming their emotions and physical attributes. Mandi serom also belived to prevent postnatal blues (meroyan), high or low blood pressure, insomnia, moody, headache, loneliness and unconscious reflection (melatah).

Most midwifery plant species are wild, but many important species are native to certain location or area. The documentation of traditional medicinal plants used by the midwives in Malaysia is very limited and traditional knowledge is disappearing due to
reliance of modern medical care. Therefore Malay midwives are becoming rare and less respected. The purpose of this study is to assess and document the knowledge of traditional medicinal plant pertaining herbal traditional bath (mandi serom) in Malay culture, which is a part of an initiative systematic study baseline data for future ethnopharmacology studies and reference in Malaysia. Moreover, ethnobotany can make a positive contribution towards alternative treatment in modern medicinal practices by identifying locally available plant resources, indigenous knowledge and traditional healers (Schultes & Reis, 1995).

Materials and Methods

Sample and study area

This semi structure interview and observation were conducted at 2 different states in the west coast of Malaysia namely Perak and Negeri Sembilan. 16 Malay midwives were selected. Ethnobotanical data were collected according to the methodology described by (Ishak, 2012). A semi-structured questionnaire was used to extract information on the ethnobotanical uses of plants. To facilitate cross-checking of plant species, the specimens were identified through various floristic records or secondary data such as sources from books, internet, University of Malaya herbarium and Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) herbarium, Kepong; and also from previous research studies and journals to ascertain the nomenclature as further detailed by (Bandaranayake, 1998).

Results and Discussion

Table 1 showed a total of 20 plant species composition in traditional bath (mandi serom) for both states, Perak and Negeri Sembilan. In Perak, mandi serom practice accumulated 14 species which predominated by zingibers, herbaceous and shrubs. While in Negeri Sembilan 13 species has been used frequently in this stages of treatment. Analysis of plant materials composition demonstrated that zingibers, herbaceous and shrubs are the most common group of plants being used by Malay midwives in these two localities. _Kaempferia galangal_ (cekur), _Zingiber officinale_ (halia putih), _Curcuma domestica_ (kunyit), _Alpinia galangal_ (lengkuas) and _Pandanus polycephalus_ (pandan) were observed being used in both localities.

![Figure 1.3: Cymbogon nardus (serai wangi)](image1)

![Figure 1.4: Alpinia galangal (lengkuas)](image2)
Both states portray different plant composition which exhibit their own identity based on different environmental conditions. The results also suggest that the selection of plant species composition for different process in traditional Malay midwifery practices is mediated by the availability of plant materials at that particular environment versus the origin of the knowledge was transferred. In several instances, environment and culture of certain midwife will influence the selection of plant species composition for every stage and process as well as localities. Nevertheless, the origin of the midwife and traditional Malay midwifery practices knowledge appears to be a key factor and indicator for the plant species selection.

**Conclusion**

The documentation of plant species used in Malay midwifery practices in Perak and Negeri Sembilan has proved to be an effective tool for investigating the environmental and culture factors of Malay traditional knowledge in midwifery practice. Medicinal plants are seldom recorded in a written form by the villagers but are still mainly based on oral history and cultural traditions passed down through the generations. Ethno-botany can make a positive contribution to alternative treatment in modern medical practices by identifying locally available plant resources, indigenous knowledge and traditional healers. Development activities which put indigenous knowledge into the context of natural resource management are particularly important. Therefore, future studies are needed in order to establish a medicinal plant information database in order to educate young people especially and Malaysian about the importance of ethno-botany functions and uses. By understanding the environment and culture of the society that influenced traditional Malay midwifery practices, it should be possible to preserve our traditional knowledge from becoming history.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local name</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Scientific name</th>
<th>Types of plant</th>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Perak</th>
<th>Negeri Sembilan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonglai/baka</td>
<td>Zingiberaceae</td>
<td>Zingiber cassumunar</td>
<td>Zingiber</td>
<td>Perak</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bunga raya</td>
<td>Malvaceae</td>
<td><em>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</em></td>
<td>Shrub</td>
<td>Perak</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cekur</td>
<td>Zingiberaceae</td>
<td><em>Kaempferia galangal</em></td>
<td>Zingiber</td>
<td>Perak</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Halba</td>
<td>Fabaceae</td>
<td>Trigonella foenum graecum</td>
<td>Herbaceous</td>
<td>Perak</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halia merah</td>
<td>Zingiberaceae</td>
<td>Zingiber minus</td>
<td>Zingiber</td>
<td>Perak</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halia putih</td>
<td>Zingiberaceae</td>
<td>Zingiber officinale</td>
<td>Zingiber</td>
<td>Perak</td>
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<td>Inai</td>
<td>Lythraceae</td>
<td><em>Lawsonia inermis</em></td>
<td>Tree</td>
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<td>Jerangau</td>
<td>Arecaceae</td>
<td>Acorus calamus</td>
<td>Macrophyte</td>
<td>Perak</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Kunyit</td>
<td>Zingiberaceae</td>
<td>Curcuma domestica</td>
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<td>Perak</td>
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<td>Zingiberaceae</td>
<td>Curcuma zedoaria</td>
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<td>Perak</td>
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<td>Lempoayang</td>
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<td>Zingiber zerumbit</td>
<td>Zingiber</td>
<td>Perak</td>
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<td>Lengkuas</td>
<td>Zingiberaceae</td>
<td>Alpinia galangal</td>
<td>Zingiber</td>
<td>Perak</td>
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<td>Lime</td>
<td>Rutaceae</td>
<td><em>Citrus aurantifolia</em></td>
<td>Shrub</td>
<td>Perak</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Labiatae/lamiacea</td>
<td>Pogostemon cablin benth.</td>
<td>Herbaceous</td>
<td>Perak</td>
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<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Scientific Name</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Useful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pandan</td>
<td>Pandanaceae</td>
<td><em>Pandan amaryllifolius</em></td>
<td>Herbaceous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pisang</td>
<td>Musaceae</td>
<td><em>Musa spp.</em></td>
<td>Zingiber</td>
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<td>Pisang Kelat air</td>
<td>Musaceae</td>
<td><em>Musa paradisiaca</em></td>
<td>Zingiber</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serai wangi</td>
<td>Gramineae</td>
<td><em>Cymbogon nardus</em></td>
<td>Herbaceous</td>
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<td>Seringan/Beringan</td>
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<td><em>Flemingia strobilifera</em></td>
<td>Shrub</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sireh</td>
<td>Piperaceae</td>
<td><em>Piper betle</em></td>
<td>Climber</td>
<td>*</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: List of plant materials used during mandi serom by 16 traditional Malay midwives at 2 different localities in the west coast of Malaysia (Perak and Negeri Sembilan)

References