

The Diminishing of Supernatural Beliefs: A Case Of Bujang Valley, Merbok

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ABSTRACT

In the olden days, Malay communities in Lembah Bujang, Kedah have strong beliefs towards supernatural beings. The concept of interdependence between human and supernatural beings started as job task was solely dependent on human strength. Technology was unknown during those days which force some people to seek help from supernatural beings. Religious beliefs were shaky, and animistic was the in thing. The methodology adopted in this study was through the adoption of the oral history method and was found deemed appropriate for this type of study. This phenomenon has gone through great revolution when the Islamic religion was introduced and communities learn about Islamic concept through Islamic teaching and learning in mosque and now books and materials on Islamic religion can be obtain easily through which changes the belief and culture of the Lembah bujang communities. The belief in the supernatural, though inherent among the residents of the Bujang Valley in the early 20th century, began to diminish towards the latter half of the century with better understanding and appreciation of Islam.

Keywords: Bujang Valley, supernatural beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Just like other Malay communities in previous time, the Malays in Lembah Bujang held strong beliefs in the supernaturals. One of the elders in the village, known as Mak Tam Yah, described the practice of keeping *pelesit* among some women. *Pelesit* is a familiar spirit which normally assumes the form of a grasshopper. The owner would keep it in a small jar or bottle and the *pelesit* would be released when it was needed to do the owner's bidding.

According to Mak Tam Yah, the women kept the *pelesit* as a means to retain the love and affection of their husbands. Some kept *pelesit* so that they would be looked upon favourably and admirably by anyone in contact with them. Some keepers of *pelesit* could even cuckold their husbands. They turned their husbands into gullible simpletons and conduct extra-marital affairs with other men. Shamelessly, they would boast of their liaisons and the prowess of their lovers to other women in the village.

The *pelesit*, when hungry would say to its master “*Mak ... aku lapaq, aku nak pi cari makan*” (Mother, I’m hungry.... I want to go out and search for food). At first the keeper would forbid the demon from going by saying, “*Jangan la cek oi nanti orang buat hang*” (No dear, don’t leave, the villagers would inflict harm on you.) The *pelesit* would then persuade its owner, stating that it had the cravings for cucumbers. Mak Tam Yah further explained that the word cucumbers referred to human embryos.

Once permission was granted, the *pelesit* would roam the village at night looking for a pregnant woman and proceed to devour the embryo in the woman’s womb. When a pregnant mother suddenly wailed that she had lost the baby mid-pregnancy, people would know it was the work of some hungry *pelesit*.

The *pelesit* also had the ability to possess others. A woman possessed by a *pelesit* would become hysterical and behave in peculiar manners. Mak Tam Yah described two incidents in which two different women were possessed by a *pelesit*.

In the first incident, the husband of the woman passed by the house of a *pelesit* keeper and was followed home by the spirit. The *pelesit* latched on the man’s newborn baby, causing the baby to wail non-stop. The unsuspecting mother rocked the baby’s cradle in an attempt to stop her from crying and the *pelesit* was transferred to her. The possessed woman then started to cry and wail hysterically.

Seeing this, the husband, who himself was a religious teacher, realized that something was amiss. He quickly squeezed the wife’s toe and recited some verses from the Quran. This caused the *pelesit* to reveal the identity of its owner before relinquishing its possession of the woman’s body.

In another incident, the possessed woman behaved in a strange manner. She jumped frog-like for a distance of about fifty metres. As the villagers gathered around her, she hurled abuses and insults at them especially to those who tried to calm her down. Mak Tam Yah said the *pelesit* liked to create anger and resentment between the possessed and others who were trying to help.

Pak Long Daud meanwhile recalled the practice of keeping *tenggalung*. *Tenggalung* is also another form of familiar spirit kept by women for the same purposes as keeping *pelesit*. Unlike a *pelesit*, a *tenggalung* inhabited the owner’s body. At night it would detach the owner’s head from the body and fly around with the viscera trailing behind the head. As it flew by looking for food, the dangling entrails would twinkle like fire-flies. Mothers, at those times, would forbid their children from catching fireflies, fearing that it could be a *tenggalung* that was accidentally caught.

The *tenggalung* would sometimes alight on big trees such as the *durian* tree and when it did so, the whole tree would aglow with eerie yellowish lights. Pak Long Daud confessed to sighting a fair share of *tenggalung* when he was younger. However, it is very rare to catch sight of a *tenggalung* nowadays.

Pak Long Daud also said that upon returning home a *tenggalung* would immerse itself in a jar of vinegar so that the entrails and organs would be shrunken and it could re-enter the body from which it left. Some daring ones would turn the owner’s body onto her stomach in the middle of the night before the *tenggalung* returned. When the keeper awoke the next day, her head would be facing backward. In this way the keeper of the demon could be exposed.

However, not all spirits were kept for evil purposes. Some villagers described the practice of keeping *hantu raya* or the 'supreme demon' mainly for working the fields. When the owner required the *hantu raya* to clear his paddy fields, he would place a huge earthen jar of a sweet delicacy known as *cendol* at the centre of his field and four sickle-like tools known as *tajak* at the four corners of the field.

At night, the villagers could see the *tajak* swinging away at the grass – the sounds heard late into the night but the very beings doing the labour were invisible to the naked eyes. The next day, the whole field would be cleared and the earthen jar containing the feast for the *hantu raya* would be completely emptied as well. However, such an occurrence was so common at that time that the villagers were not at all frightened by it.

Another demon considered to have supreme powers was the *jin tanah* or the genie of the earth. The genie of the earth was used as the protector of one's property. To awaken the earth genie, one needed to circle his property thrice while chanting some mantras. The owner had to make sure that he began and ended his movement at the same point. Once awoken, the genie would be on guard to ensure the safety of the owner's property.

Mak Tam Yah described how his grandfather Tok Senawi used to keep some *hantu raya* as servants to work in his paddy fields. However, when Mak Tam Yah's father, Ngah Khamis, married her mother and joined the household, Tok Senawi began to complain that his *hantu raya* had been climbing into his house at night causing his sleep disturbed. Upon enquiry, Ngah Khamis confessed that he had befriended the genie of the earth. Apparently the *hantu raya* was frightened by the genie of the earth which had greater powers than it.

Other than the familiar spirits, the Malays in Lembah Bujang also believed in the existence of free spirits such as the river spirit – popularly known as *hantu air*. Peace offerings were made to appease the spirits of the river. Done annually by Ngah Khamis, the peace offerings were to ensure the safe passage of the villagers as they travelled down the Sungai Merbok, or as they navigated the myriad tributaries looking for fish or resources from the mangrove forest and even when hunting the crocodiles.

The village children would often partake in the annual event. They would bring food from home to be shared with one another while they sat chit-chatting by the river bank - watching as the river spirit was appeased with offerings of rice pops, eggs and yellow glutinous rice.

When the villagers were in need of medical help, they would worship the supernatural elements to seek help and assistance. This was done by offering a feast made of eggs and yellow glutinous rice which was often placed beneath big trees such as the tamarind and *keriyang* trees that grew in the village. The village children would often run away in fear when they came across such offerings laid out for the spirits.

OF SALIH AND HIS MINIONS

Salih was the leader of a clan of *hantu raya* owned by the late village head of Mukim Bujang. He was originally kept by Penghulu Mat and then passed down to his son, Penghulu Hashim. Penghulu Hashim's son, the late Penghulu Ismail, was the last keeper of Salih. The name Salih was derived from the Malay word '*bersalih*' – referring to the spirit's tendency to assume the form of its owner. Salih and his minions were kept mainly to protect the villages under the care of the Penghulu. They also assisted in the Penghulu's work as a *bomoh* or shaman.

Being a protector of the villages encompassed the duty of safe-guarding the community and the villagers' farms, and performing manual labours especially those beyond

men's natural strength to complete. The owner's next of kin, Pak Long Wa Man, recalled how the villagers once faced difficulties in replacing a rotting coconut trunk used as a bridge by them to cross the Pengkalan Bujang river.

Some men from the village had managed to cut down a tree and were trying to carry the trunk to the river to replace the old coconut trunk but it was too heavy to be accomplished by mere mortal strength. The matter was brought up to the Penghulu who advised them not to fret and to just go home and rest. That night, Salih and his minions were sent to complete the task. The next morning, the villagers found the tree trunk already in place and the bridge ready to be used.

Salih had his own territories. The boundary of his territories began at Getah Sepokok – an area which leads into Mukim Bujang - where the UiTM Kedah campus is presently located. Salih would often stir trouble for newcomers to the village especially when they crossed into his territories.

In one such incident, a Chinese businessman had started a tin-mining operation in Getah Sepokok. For a few consecutive nights, the mine would experience electrical circuit breakdowns causing power failure at the mines. Though repaired in the morning, the same problem would occur at night; thus, causing the owner to begin worrying. This matter was brought to the Penghulu's attention.

The Penghulu then ordered the owner to slaughter a goat and hold a feast with the help of the villagers. He also ordered them to keep the goat's head and ears which were later offered to Salih as a peace offering. Pak Long Wa Man, who heard the story from his father, Tok Panglima, said the blood from the goat was mixed with some rice and served together with the goat's head and ears and were placed beneath a big tree.

Tok Panglima related to him that the sounds the spirit's satisfied grunts and the sound of teeth gnashing on bones as the spirit partook in the feast, were clearly heard, making the hair on the back of Tok Panglima's neck stood on ends. It clearly was a sound not to be heard by the faint-hearted. However, the spirit, while enjoying the feast, did not reveal his true form to the humans. The only indicator that he was there was the disappearance of the food offered to appease him.

However, Salih and his minions were never a nuisance to the villagers. He was a bit mischievous and loved to appear to the villagers in the form of a piece of white cloth floating in the air. The late Tok Nah, the writer's own grandmother, used to entertain the grandchildren with the tale of how Salih would appear in that form as she worked on her land which was adjacent to the Penghulu's. She would playfully scold him "*Oh, hang ka Salih, jangan la kacau aku nak buat kerja ni.*" (Oh, it's you salih... don't disturb me as I'm just doing my work.). Upon that, Salih would fly away and disappear from sight.

Another female elder also reminisced how Salih would pull pranks on them as they worked in their paddy field. He would splash water on the bunds that ran between the paddy fields causing them to be wet and slippery. They would find the bunds treacherous to walk on when they wanted to return home after completing their tasks. However, the common words about Salih heard from the villagers were "*Oh.. dia tak kacau orang*" stressing that he was never a disturbance to the villagers.

A tale, famously told of Salih, was of how he often accompanied the villagers when they had to travel alone at night. To move from one village to another, the villagers often had to cross vast areas of paddy fields and at night this could be quite frightening. The Penghulu was known to offer the services of Salih to accompany the villagers especially when they were going home from Kampung Bujang to Kampung Sungai Gelam or Kampung Pengkalan Bujang.

Pak Long Daud personally experienced the 'novelty' of being escorted home by Salih. He vividly recalled that the trick was to let Salih walk behind you and not to let him lead the way. This was because if allowed to lead, Salih would take you along the most treacherous path and across the stream where it was at its widest. As they made their way home, Salih was invisible to the naked eyes but one could hear the sounds of his footfalls and see the paddy growing in the field parting as he waded through them. Salih also liked to imitate what the person did as he or she walked in front of him. If that person kicked on an object, Salih would repeat the same action. If the person jumped over the stream, Salih would follow suit.

Upon reaching home, the villager needed to inform Salih that they had reached their destination and he was given permission to return home. If this was not done, he would stay and disturb you in your sleep as he was an obedient servant and could not return home unless bade to do so. The same story was recalled by the late Tok Nah who also used to be escorted home by Salih. She used to bring a basket of *dodol* -a traditional delicacy - to be sold around the village. She would often stop by the Penghulu's house to chat with the Penghulu's wife – the late Tok Ba'i. The Penghulu would bid her to stay a little longer. "Stay awhile longer" he would say "Don't be afraid of the dark. I'll ask Salih to accompany you home".

A poor unsuspecting soul, the late Tok Timah Sungkit, from the neighbouring village, Kampung Titi Semeling, also had the same experience which she found scary. Working as a midwife, she once went to the Penghulu's house for a social visit. She stayed chit-chatting until late in the evening. As she was taking leave, the penghulu said to her "Ooh Timah, stay awhile longer. Perform your Maghrib prayer here and have dinner with us. Later, I will ask Salih to escort you home."

Thinking that Salih was one of the penghulu's sons, she agreed. After performing the Maghrib prayers and having dinner, she walked home with Salih following right behind her. Being talkative in nature, Tok Timah tried to engage Salih in small talk but Salih would often reply only with a 'hmm'. Sometimes he would just grunt in agreement with what Tok Timah was saying. Tok Timah continued talking despite receiving no answer from Salih. She knew Salih was following as his footfalls and the sound of rustling *lalang* could be heard behind her.

Upon reaching home, Tok Timah invited Salih in for a cup of coffee. At first Salih was quiet but as Tok Timah kept on insisting that he come up for a cup of coffee, Salih stepped on the ladder leading up to the house. As his foot touched the first step, Tok Timah heard a loud breaking sound... "Raaaakkkk..." and she saw large hairy feet and arms under the dim light of the oil lamp. She was extremely frightened and shouted at the top of her voice. "Go away Salih... Oh...Salih, go back to your house". As she shouted at the spirit, she quickly closed the door of her house.

The next day, Tok Timah, the mid-wife, went to the house of a religious teacher known as Tuan Teh and related the previous night's occurrence to him. With a smile, Tuan Teh said to her, "That was not his son. That was his *khadam* (servant)". Only then did Tok Timah know the true identity of Salih.

Penghulu Hashim had a son who was the headmaster of Sekolah Kebangsaan Batu Hampar. It was said that he brought one of Salih's minions to guard the school. At night, the sounds of someone walking on the rooftop could be heard. It is said that the minion is still guarding the school to this day. A big mango tree grew in the school compound and a tale has it that anyone other than the schoolchildren would fall sick if they plucked fruits from the tree.

Another female villager shared the story of how, when she was still a child, the mothers in the village taught their children to give a salute to Salih whenever they passed by two places known to be his favourite haunts. One place was the Penghulu's office itself and the other was the Titi Tinggi coconut trunk bridge. They were taught to say "Salute to you Tok Salih, your grandchildren who lack manners and grace request permission to pass through". The belief was that by doing so, the children would not be spooked by the spirit and would not be inflicted with illnesses.

With the death of Penghulu Ismail, one of Penghulu Hashim's sons, none of the remaining kin wanted to care for Salih. For a while he was kept confined within the perimeters of the Penghulu's old office. After some time, he was set adrift in one of the tributaries of Sungai Merbok which led to the sea – as was the practice of olden times when one wanted to get rid of his or her familiar spirit. Of his minions, words had it that they had been banished into the jungles of Pahang. With Salih set adrift into the unknown, the tales of Salih came to an end, saved in the reminiscences of the elders about a benign being that used to dwell among them in the sleepy little valley.

When asked about the practice of keeping familiar spirits, Pak Long Wa Man said it was a common practice at that time and, if one was a person of power, one needed to have an advantage over others so that one could command their respects and loyalty. Pak Long Daud summed it best when he said that the spirits were part of the surroundings. They were all God's creatures and to live peacefully, people simply need to learn to co-exist with them.

RESEARCH DESIGN

An exploratory research design is adopted in this study where a qualitative approach is more useful for discovering the hidden tales in Bujang Valley. Qualitative approach is able to provide in-depth (deeper understanding) information on the characteristics of the Malay tales that we need to unveil. Furthermore, it allows us to discover "hidden" motivations and values.

This kind of research design makes it possible for us to use more unstructured data collection techniques as the nature of oral history methodology requires subjective interpretation of the information collected from the community who is willing to share hidden Malay tales around the Bujang Valley. With qualitative approach, researchers will have to exercise a form of trustworthiness on the respondent and qualitative approach permits us to give strong emphasis and full trust on the information provided by the respondents.

Qualitative data method permits us to collect information using unstructured interviews or observation. Focus groups of 1 to 5 respondents will be identified and in-depth interviews will be conducted in this research approach i.e. qualitative research approach. The number of respondents required depends on whether the researchers are satisfied that the story has been thoroughly investigated. One of the issues that need to be addressed in this type of study is the ethics in qualitative data collection. The researchers will ensure that the interviewees understand the purpose of the interviews and how the researchers intend to use it. The informant will be informed that the interviews will not be treated as a private conversation.

The Bujang Valley or Lembah Bujang covers an area of approximately 224 square km. Situated near Merbok Kedah, between Gunung Jerai in the north and Muda River in the South. This study is based on respondents who are still alive and living in the Bujang Valley to tell or reveal according to what he/she remembers from previous experience and tales who are handed-down by the previous generation. Their stories are based on events which happened as far back as the 1900.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Just like other Malay communities at that time, the Malays in Lembah Bujang held strong beliefs in the supernatural's. One of the elders in the village, known as Mak Tam Yah, described the practice of keeping *pelesit* among some women. *Pelesit* is a familiar spirit which normally assumes the form of a grasshopper. The owner would keep it in a small jar or bottle and the *pelesit* would be released when it was needed to do the owner's bidding.

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In the first incident, the husband of the woman passed by the house of a *pelesit* keeper and was followed home by the spirit. The *pelesit* latched on the man's newborn baby, causing the baby to wail non-stop. The unsuspecting mother rocked the baby's cradle in an attempt to stop her from crying and the *pelesit* was transferred to her. The possessed woman then started to cry and wail hysterically.

Seeing this, the husband, who himself was a religious teacher, realized that something was amiss. He quickly squeezed the wife's toe and recited some verses from the Quran. This caused the *pelesit* to reveal the identity of its owner before relinquishing its possession of the woman's body.

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Story Tellers of this oral research