# *Information Technology Utilization in the Practice of Shamanism during Covid-19"*

*Pardamaean Daulay¹, Momy A. Hunowui²*

¹ Universitas Terbuka  Indonesia. E-mail: pardameandaulay@ecampus.ut.ac.id
² IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo. E-mail: momyhunowu@gmail.com

## A B S T R A C T

"The Practice of Shamanism Continues into Modern Society. To survive and grow, shamans follow the development of the times and continuously adapt to technological advancements. This research aims to explore the utilization of information technology in shamanic practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research method used is qualitative, using modernization theory. The results show the existence of shamanic practices utilizing information technology during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research subjects use features of information technology such as phone calls, video calls, and WhatsApp to provide services to their patients. Information technology is also used for promoting their services; they use Facebook and Instagram for this purpose. The utilization of information technology is done to increase the number of patients and to heal both mild and severe illnesses, including curing Covid-19 patients. Their patients feel comfortable because they do not have to travel far to meet with the shaman. This research concludes that the utilization of information technology has expanded into shamanic practices since the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world.

## A.  INTRODUCTION

The practice of shamanism in modern society is still significant. For instance, it was utilized by the MotoGP committee in Mandalika, Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, in March 2022 to stop the rain (Pranita, 2022). This irrational action has raised questions among modernist circles. This reality contradicts Auguste Comte's theory of social evolution, which states that society evolves from theological to positivistic thinking. As discussed by Gumilang (2021) in the article "Exploring Shamanic Practices Around the World," advanced countries such as England and Saudi Arabia have not been able to eradicate shamanic practices in their modern societies (Gumilang, 2021). People do not need scientific explanations because they need affordable

healing (Sasole, 2009). Some of those who visit doctors and hospitals are already desperate because they are in critical condition, and the shaman has washed his hands of them.

Geertz (2014), in his notes, stated that the shaman has become an asset to the traditional life of Indonesian society. Shamanic practices cover almost all aspects of community life, ranging from social and cultural aspects, politics, economy, to health (Indra Setia Bakti, 2018). In the social and cultural aspect, people who visit the shaman have positive or negative motives, such as asking for charms to be loved and respected by the community or seeking revenge to destroy someone (Mamvura, 2021). In the political aspect, shamanic practices are used by political actors to win political battles (Bahaudin, 2015) or maintain power (Bahaudin, 2015). In the economic aspect, shamanic practices are used by traders to make their own

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business thrive or to destroy their competitors' businesses (Mgumia, 2020). Meanwhile, in the health aspect, shamanic practices are directed towards healing diseases that cannot be cured medically or other peculiar ailments such as complaints of abdominal pain where no medical abnormalities are found but are healed simply by being given plain water by a traditional healer. The research results (Desni, Wibowo, & Rosyidah, 2011) show that people have more trust in traditional medicine because it is cheaper, more practical, and easier to access, while access to modern health services is less accessible. Thus, shamanic practices in modern society are widely used in the health aspect due to disappointment with medical treatment (Wulansari, et al., 2021).

Even shamanic practices adapt to the environment. They utilize information and communication technology to develop their services. Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020-2022, some shamans promoted their services through social media, and some of them even had their own special websites on the internet (Ridwan, 2020). Some shamans can be found on YouTube, such as Ningsih Tinampi, who has recently become famous and has been invited to several private TV stations. The modernization era, full of rationality, does not reduce shamanic practices. In fact, shamanic practices are increasingly widespread using information technology networks (Kasmana, 2019). In conclusion, this research serves as a crucial exploration of the evolving role of shamanic practices, especially in their intersection with information technology during the Covid-19 pandemic. It sheds light on the persistence and adaptability of these practices in the face of societal changes and rationalization, making it an essential study in understanding the dynamics of traditional beliefs in contemporary times.

As far as the author's research is concerned, studies on distance healing practices can be grouped into two categories: firstly, studies on medical distance healing using digital technology that has been long-developed. For example, Zhao et al. (2021) researched long-distance healing induced by lasers; Griffiths et al. (2022) researched long-distance healing using ultrafast magneto-responsive nanocomposite-based thermoplastics; Common methods such as providing services through telephone, telemedicine, or other technologies are studied by Wright and Caudill (2020). Secondly, studies on mystical distance healing, are related.

## B. METHOD

This study utilizes a qualitative method as its aim is to explore the meaning behind the reality of utilizing information technology in the practice of traditional medicine during the COVID-19 pandemic in a natural setting. This is in line with Mars & Stoker's (2010) view that qualitative methods aim to explore people's subjective experiences and the meaning that can be connected to other experiences. Qualitative methods are also good for delving into the thought processes or narratives constructed by society. Qualitative methods also pay special attention to contextual issues, placing the attitudes and behaviors of informants in the context of personal biography and broader social backgrounds (Yin, 2009).

The research location was selected in Gorontalo based on the consideration that (1) Gorontalo is an area that has a wealth of cultural treasures and a majority Muslim population, but still has many traditional medicine practices. Second, Gorontalo residents still utilize traditional medicine as their primary solution before taking other paths, both in terms of health and other socio-cultural aspects.

This study uses two sources of data, namely primary and secondary data. Primary data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with informants selected purposively. A total of 14 traditional healers and 5 users of traditional medicine were successfully interviewed. Both categories of informants were chosen to identify the perspectives of practitioners and users of traditional medicine practices.

Interviews were conducted by visiting the informants. The interviews were not only conducted once, but repeatedly with high intensity at different locations and times based on accessibility. Difficulties encountered during data collection were when the informant was not at home or was attending to a patient elsewhere, which took a long time to conduct the interview. However, the researcher also encountered ease, where some informants were already known and could be interviewed without making appointments.

This study is a collaboration between researchers from UT and IAIN Gorontalo with a division of labor. The IAIN Gorontalo researcher was responsible for data collection both in Gorontalo and Makassar. The data collected was discussed with the UT researcher using zoom meeting. The UT lecturer was responsible for data analysis and submission to a journal.

The various categories of data obtained from various sources and methods were analyzed through three stages that included: (a) data reduction as a process of organizing data in a more systematic form, particularly thematically; (b) data display as an effort to present research findings in the form of tables and interview quotes, and (c) data verification as a stage of data summary, particularly following the trend of the obtained data.

## C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the author will present the research results. Firstly, the author describes the utilization of information technology in traditional healing practices, and secondly, the utilization

of information technology in promoting traditional healing services.

## 1. The Utilization of Information Technology in Traditional Healing Practices

The utilization of information technology in traditional healing practices is done differently by the traditional healers who were researched. It is used as a long-distance communication medium for treatment. Various information media are used by healers and patients based on Android features like WhatsApp, telephone, and video call. The most commonly used feature is telephone and video call, and the researcher did not find other features like using email.

Various diseases complained about by patients are categorized as mild and severe. Examples of mild diseases are fever, headache, fatigue, and joint pain, while examples of severe diseases are those that cannot be cured medically, such as swelling in the stomach and other body parts.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the mild diseases complained about by the public were similar to the signs of being infected with the Covid-19 virus. Some people prefer to seek the help of traditional healers rather than going to healthcare facilities because patients suspected of having Covid-19 will be self-isolated. Feeling unwilling to be confined when self-isolated, some people avoid going to the doctor. For certain traditional healers, diseases indicated as positive for Covid-19 are just diseases brought by supernatural beings so healing can be done traditionally by performing certain rituals to expel supernatural disturbances. This is acknowledged by Pak Usman and Ka Puu, who have knowledge of overcoming supernatural beings.

This study found that the complaints conveyed by patients when seeking treatment from traditional healers using information technology, such as telephone, WhatsApp, and video calls, are to ask for help in healing diseases, both mild diseases such as fever, stomach pain, and severe diseases such as being under a spell. They do not seek treatment from doctors because of the complicated process. A user of traditional healing services who resides in Gorontalo said:

"I go to traditional healers when experiencing discomfort, fever, or stomach pain. The healer will provide drinking water and other media to cure the disease. This type of disease can be cured immediately, and the effect can be felt immediately. If I go to the health center, I have to wait for working days and bring requirements such as BPJS cards, and after going to the health center, I have to queue. Recovery is also not immediately felt (Ibu Hali, 56 years old)."

All traditional healers studied also mentioned that patients who come for treatment usually complain of fever, stomach pain, and dizziness. The following is a statement from one of the informants:

"Residents usually complain of fever, stomach pain, and dizziness. For this type of disease, I only need to provide a glass of water to drink and rub it on the part of the body that is sick. Initially, I only served relatives and residents around, but gradually the information spread. Anytime, someone comes knocking on the door even though it is already midnight. Since they have come, I must serve them voluntarily considering humanity" (Balimbo Tuu, 67 years old).

In addition to being able to cure chronic diseases, traditional healers can also heal Covid-19 patients. This was revealed in a case where a Covid-19 patient's family contacted a traditional healer by phone to ask for healing help. Through treatment carried out by the traditional healer using information technology, the Covid-19 patient who was being treated at the hospital was then declared cured and allowed to go home. Traditional healing practices using information technology are increasingly popular among the community during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, in Islamic law, traditional healing practices.

Out of the 14 traditional healers who participated in this research, only some of them provided online services (remotely), while for certain illnesses, treatment had to be done offline (in person). Mild illnesses such as fever, headache, fatigue, joint pain, and Covid-19 symptoms can be treated online, while serious illnesses that cannot be treated medically (such as black magic) by certain healers must be treated directly (for example, by massaging a specific part of the body), either by inviting the healer to the patient's location or by bringing the patient to the healer's residence.

**Table 1: Typology of Diseases and Used Media**

| Types of treated diseases. | Healing Medium (via) |
|---|---|
| Mild diseases (fever, etc.) | By phone, whatsApp Group (WAG) |
| Positive for Covid-19 infection. | By phone, whatsApp Group (WAG) |
| Severe illnesses (such as black magic, etc.) | By phone, whatsApp Group (WAG), Video Call |

The use of information media such as telephone, video call, and WhatsApp is usually obtained from previous patients who provide instructions on the steps to be taken.

First, the patient directly contacts the shaman through the circulating phone number. Usually, it is the previous patient who has interacted with the shaman who contacts them. After that, the patient conveys the disease they are suffering from. Then, the shaman instructs the

patient to prepare the necessary ingredients for treatment. The ingredients depend on the type of disease complained of. All shamans use plain water as a healing medium for complaints such as fever, headache, fatigue, and joint pain.

To understand the use of information technology in shamanic practices, researchers provide an illustration of the practice used by Pak Usman as recounted by one of his patients (Ibu Yati). Ibu Yati had been suffering from swollen joint pain for a long time. She had been to a doctor but did not recover. Ibu Yati heard from her friend about Pak Usman who could cure swelling diseases through communication and information technology channels. One Friday morning, Ibu Yati contacted Pak Usman by phone. Ibu Yati conveyed her complaint about the long-standing disease she had. Pak Usman asked Ibu Yati to prepare the healing ingredients such as turmeric, ginger, and cloves. The three ingredients were taken in appropriate amounts and Pak Usman chanted spells from a distance. After that, the ingredients were pounded and applied to the swollen parts of the body. The ingredients were applied three times a day for seven consecutive days. Pak Usman asked to be informed about the progress of the healing. If it did not work, Pak Usman would take other measures.

Pak Usman explained that healing using supernatural creatures is closely related to magical powers, so supernatural creatures can be commanded to come to his patients wherever they are. So it is not necessary to meet in person, as long as the complaint is known and the identity is recognized, the healing process can be connected. This process can be done through telephone connections. Magical powers can be sent to the known object, and the healing process occurs.

In addition to curing chronic diseases, Pak Usman can also cure COVID-19 patients. He claimed that several COVID-19 patients who had tested positive could be cured using supernatural powers from a distance. The families of patients who were worried about their condition contacted Pak Usman to ask for healing help. Within a matter of days, two COVID-19 patients who were being treated at the hospital were allowed to go home. According to Pak Usman's beliefs, the COVID-19 virus is a disease caused by supernatural disturbances. This is acknowledged by other shamans such as Ka Puu, who said that pandemics like COVID-19 had occurred in the past and could be resolved by holding a ceremony to call on the spirits and give offerings to stop their disturbance (Hunowu et al., 2020).

Second, use the WhatsApp group (WAG). The use of WAG in shamanic practices is utilized by a Gorontalo community in Makassar. They use whatsapp groups as a medium of communication in healing practices. The formation of the WAG was initiated by a Makassar Gorontalo bus driver who has knowledge of shamanism. He was unable to serve questions and requests from patients who contacted him via WhatsApp. He then formed the WAG to avoid repetitive questions and answers. Through the WAG media, the citizen service process becomes effective. All group members can submit their complaints, the shaman who is a member of the group will give instructions, ask to provide certain ingredients for treatment, after everything is available, the dukun will write down the incantations. It is felt that the use of WAG media does not interfere with the activities of WAG members because incoming messages can be responded to after the activity ends. This is different from telephone and video calls which must be answered immediately. In this community, the dukun is not paid, except in urgent cases and requires the dukun to come to the patient's house.

Third, the use of video call features to cure their patients. The use of video call features allows the shaman to directly see the patient's condition from a distance. The shaman also directly sees how the ingredients used as a healing medium are used by their patients. One shaman who does long-distance healing is Ustadz Yunus. This hajj-awarded Ustadz is known for his ability to heal from a distance through video call or telephone connections. Therefore, he receives phone calls and video calls from relatives and families who are far away and ask for his help. Ustadz Yunus only asks for plain water to be provided, then the phone camera is directed at a glass of water and stirred with a spoon, then he instructs the patient to drink it.

## 2. Utilizing Information Technology for Promoting Shamanic Services

This research also shows that in addition to healing practices, information technology is also used as a promotional tool for shamanic services. Shamanic practitioners have utilized various social media platforms to market their services, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. For example, pak Nano (a pseudonym) is a shaman who lives in Gorontalo and has been using Facebook and WhatsApp for three years to promote his services. Pak Nano admitted that promoting shamanic practices through social media is more promising because it can reach all levels of society. He said:

"Social media is like an unlimited advertising pond. It's up to us to fish smartly. Social media also reaches the younger generation, a future asset of clients that can be educated from an early age. Social media can convince patients that we really exist, not fictitious or fraudulent. I often showcase a patient's healing process through Instagram and YouTube. The difference is, in the past, we used a traditional payment method, but now patients can make transfers through the provided bank account number.

There are even shamans who openly promote their services, both positively and negatively. To understand the use of information technology in promoting shamanic practices, one can observe a shaman's post on their personal Facebook page. The promotion is related to supernatural money rituals, magical ATM, love spells, curses, selling fetuses, selling enemies, and even selling wives. In another picture, it is even more frightening, "it won't take long to make your biggest enemy die a horrible death."

**Figure 1: Promotion of Traditional Healing Practices through Social Media. Source: https://www.liputan6.com**



This data indicates that the practice of traditional healing has spread to social media and reached all layers of society, especially among netizens who are familiar with social media.

**Table 2:Distance Healing Method using Digital Media**

| Technology used | Objective/Function |
|---|---|
| Social Media | As a promotional/advertising medium. |
| Phone dan Video call | "As a medium for channelling energy/spells." |

The table above shows that digital technology is utilized by shamans in two ways; first as a means of socializing and promoting their services, using social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube channels. Afterwards, patients still come to seek the address listed. Second, shamans use telephone networks or video calls for the diagnosis and treatment process. The shaman instructs the patient over the phone to provide certain materials such as water, and then the shaman sends their spells from a distance, and the water is drunk and the remainder is rubbed on the affected body part.

Discussion. The study found that 14 shamans in Gorontalo extensively utilize information technology practices in both their treatment and promotion of their services. Firstly, they use social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube channels for socializing and promoting their services. Secondly, they use telephone networks, WhatsApp, and video calls for the diagnosis and treatment process. The shamans instruct patients over the phone to provide certain materials such

as water, and then the shaman sends their spells from a distance, and the water is drunk and the remainder is rubbed on the affected body part.

The practice of using technology and information for promoting shamanism has not been found before. The results of this study are useful to determine the adaptability of shamans to modern technology. This study confirms that shamans are not ignorant of technology information. This study found the utilization of WAG technology, which was not found in previous studies. The use of WAG technology was initiated by a shaman due to the numerous questions asked by patients. Furthermore, the use of information technology in shamanic practice is an effort to adapt to the changing times.

The shamans are able to use information technology because they have social networks, and they even have their own organization. From these social networks, shamans share information, including in learning how to use information technology, such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

From the perspective of patients, this study also found that the use of information technology is advantageous. Firstly, female patients are no longer afraid when treated by male shamans because they can avoid meeting them face-to-face. This can also prevent the practice of sexual misconduct by shamans. Secondly, it saves time and money. The use of information technology in shamanic practice can save time and transportation costs for distant patients. For example, a patient in Makassar can receive treatment from a shaman in Gorontalo or vice versa without having to spend money on transportation and spend a long time travelling. Furthermore, patients can contact shamans for treatment simply by calling, using WAG, or video calls.

The use of information technology can facilitate the public in obtaining help when they are sick, without having to struggle to visit the shaman in their practice location (residence). Patients can be treated directly and experience the same healing as meeting in person. However, the use of digital technology in shamanic practice not only provides security for patients, especially from the sexual misconduct of rogue shamans, but it is also vulnerable to fraud. The opportunity for fraud can occur when transactions and money transfers are made in certain amounts but the promised healing is not obtained.

The utilization of information technology can facilitate people in obtaining medical help when they are sick, without having to go through the trouble of visiting a traditional healer at their practice (residence). Patients can be treated directly and experience the same healing as they would in face-to-face meetings. However, the use of digital technology in traditional healing practices not only provides security guarantees for patients, especially from fraudulent traditional healers, but also carries the risk of fraud. The opportunity for fraud can occur when making

transactions and transferring money in certain amounts but not receiving the promised healing.

Remote traditional healing practices through digital media are considered effective, as acknowledged by some patients of Pak Usman and Ustadz Yunus. Using smartphones, patients who want to seek treatment can find out if the traditional healer is available (online) or not, so they can immediately contact and express their complaints. This satisfaction is strongly felt when in need of a traditional healer's help in the middle of the night, when children have stomach aches and cry all night. With the help of traditional healers through telephone and social media contacts, patients receive help promptly.

The second factor felt by patients who use online traditional healing services is not having to meet in person, thereby preserving their privacy and avoiding slander. This is as expressed by female patients who feel relieved and not worried because they do not have to meet the traditional healer in person. Although the traditional healer is not committing sexual harassment, slander could still spread from irresponsible people.

The third factor is not having to travel far, incur travel expenses, etc. Through digital media, patients in the city of Makassar can seek treatment from traditional healers in Gorontalo or vice versa without having to spend money on travel and taking a long time. Some residents of Gorontalo in Makassar admit that they can contact Pak Usman, who is located in the interior of Gorontalo, for treatment just by making a phone call or video call. It doesn't take the time or cost money, and the healing effect is still felt.

**Table 3.Ease of Medical Service through Digital Media**

| Indicators | The Ease |
|---|---|
| Communicate directly | Whenever in need of immediate assistance, one can contact the traditional healer directly via telephone or social media |
| Not meeting in person | Female patients feel comfortable because they don't have to worry about meeting male shamans and it doesn't raise any suspicion. |
| Distance and Time | No need to travel far with hours/days of travel time. |

The use of digital technology in providing remote patient care has made it easier for people to get help when they are sick. Patients no longer have to struggle to visit a traditional healer in their practice location (residence). Through digital technology, patients can be treated immediately and experience the same healing effect as face-to-face consultations. The process of utilizing information technology in traditional healing practices is a form of hybridization between modern knowledge and traditional knowledge. The term hybridization can be used to trace the cultural identity of a society in a clash of cultures, between the West and the East, or between colonized and colonizer towards post-colonial society (Darmawan, 2012). In this discussion, hybridization is used in a narrower scope, namely the use of information and communication technology in traditional healing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, using features such as telephone, video calls, and WhatsApp. Based on this concept of hybridization, there is an accommodative process between the two different poles, namely the positivistic information and communication technology on one pole and the mystical traditional healing practices on the other pole, thus forming a new way that combines the two harmoniously (Sakamoto, 2016).

In the context of modernization theory, the adaptation of shamanic practices to information technology can be considered a step toward modernization within societal frameworks. Traditional practices like shamanism are not isolated from the influences of modernization but rather integrate with new elements to remain relevant and accessible to a digitally connected society.

## D. CONCLUSIONS

This study found that the traditional healers who were examined have been intensively using information technology. They use information technology for treatment and promotion. The ban on face-to-face meetings did not prevent them from treating patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditional healers are able to use information technology because they have a social network, and even have their own organizations. From this social network, traditional healers share information, including in learning to use information technology such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

From the patient's perspective, this study found that the use of information technology is very beneficial. First, female patients can avoid the practice of abusive traditional healers. Second, it saves time and money. The use of information technology in traditional healing practices can make long-distance travel more effective and save travel costs. Traditional healing practices using information technology are increasingly favoured by the community, because in Islamic Shariah, seeking treatment from traditional healers is prohibited, but with the use of information technology, this forbidden practice can be accessed secretly by its followers. While this perspective is controversial, the research notes that patients feel they benefit from shamanic healing practices. Therefore, traditional healing practices like this will continue to develop and adapt to the development of information technology. The utilization of information technology has become an integral part of shamanic practices, especially since the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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