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Oral tradition as the principal mean for the cross-generational transferor of knowledge to illuminate Semai people’s beliefs

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Abstract

This study explored the oral tradition practice among the local aborigine particularly the Semai people who live in Southeastern Perak of Peninsular Malaysia. Oral tradition is considered as a way of the aborigines to deliver lessons of life to their younger folks. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to discover the traditional knowledge that was passed down from generation to generation. The findings revealed that the main knowledge that is still being delivered through this system of oral tradition is the traditional beliefs of the Semai people. There are four fundamental beliefs of the Semai which are the belief in the spirit of Sewang, the supremacy of animals, the almighty sense of nature and the continuance of life after death.

Keywords: Oral tradition; traditional knowledge; aborigine; Semai people

1. Introduction

The aborigines or Orang Asli in Malaysia have their intrigue unique cultures and stories that possess historical importance. The stories or folklore, are the elements that are often intertwined in daily life in indigenous communities. The term “expressions of folklore” has been defined by the International Bureau of WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) as referring to the elements of "traditional artistic heritage" that a certain community or individual has developed and maintained and they reflect the traditional artistic expectations of such a community (Holden, 2008). The expressions of folklore can be in various forms. It may be oral, as in folktales; musical, as in songs; actions, as in folk dances, plays or rituals; or tangible expressions, such as drawings, paintings, carvings, sculptures, pottery, woodwork, metal ware, jewelry, basket weaving, needlework, textiles, carpets, costumes, musical instruments, and architectural forms, among others. According to WIPO, the

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systems of knowledge regarding a particular people or territory, the creations, innovations, and cultural expressions, is passed down from generation to generation and it is known as the “traditional knowledge” (Holden, 2008). It has existed among the aborigines for a long time.

The term “traditional knowledge” has come to mean the knowledge that has been passed down from one generation to the next through the oral or written traditions. All cultures have traditional knowledge. The traditional knowledge refers to the aspects of traditional aboriginal life, such as knowledge of the land and its resources, spirits, medicine and a lot other aspects of human life. However, all cultures change, and as they do new knowledge is added and some knowledge is lost. This means the traditional knowledge changes over time. Folklore and tradition both rest on notions of situation, creativity, and performance.

The aboriginal people use various paradigms of teaching and learning and oral tradition is one of the means (Cardinal and Hildebrandt, 2000). It inquires about the communication of aboriginal peoples’ culture, history, and values as told by the elders’ stories (Basso, 1996; Horne and McBeth, 1998; Mitchell, 2001; Sarris, 1993). From the ethnographic perspective, the aboriginal peoples’ beliefs and their uniqueness in the human social world are highly valued. The interpretations of the elders were accepted as traditional teachings from which new understandings could be gleaned.

Among the various Orang Asli community groups that exist in Malaysia, the Semai people have portrayed some uniqueness in their own culture. The oral tradition practice, in particular, has been within the community from generation to generation. The unique cultures and the highly esthetic values of the Semai are not to be hidden but to be revealed and appreciated as their folklores are like the ‘door’ to understand their culture and life. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to find out the traditional knowledge that is still being passed down to the present community of Semai and embraced by them. It is significant to collect, to transcribe, and translate the Semai stories and folklores as a mean to unveil the embedded knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation.

1.1. Oral tradition

There are many ways that knowledge can be passed down from one generation to another. It can be through speaking and also writing. It can also be taught without words by showing people how to do things. An oral tradition is the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next orally (by speaking). Until recently, all the aboriginal people who live in the area that is now the Northwest Territories, clutched on the knowledge that was passed to them through their oral tradition. The skills for survival such as hunting, building houses, making clothes, tools, medicine and religious practice were taught by telling and showing one another how to do these things. Singing, telling stories, and plays are also ways of passing knowledge through the oral tradition.

Glassie (1993) defines oral tradition as a rich word that names the process by which individuals simultaneously connect to the past and the present while building the future. It is a symbolic process that both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them. In other words, oral tradition is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past. Thus, oral traditions are historical sources of a special nature. They are unwritten sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission. Their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings.

2. The Semai People

The Semai are a group of Orang Asli who live in southeastern Perak and northwestern Pahang states of West Malaysia. In Perak, the Semai community is divided by anthropologists into two groups, referred to as the highland and lowland Semai. The highland Semai is more adapted to activities based on exploiting the forests resources such as hunting, fishing, gathering and engaging in farming. The lowland Semai traditionally adopted a
peasant way of life, being involved in the labour force and seeking employment in small-scale trading of jungle produce and today are more exposed to the modern economy (Juli Edo, 1998). They practice swidden horticulture in the state's rain forests. The Semai do not possess handi-crafting skills but are good in agriculture and hunting and are experts in making blowpipes. The Semai are better known as the non-violent people and the people who practise total sharing (Juli Edo, 1998).

Normally the Semai village consists of 60 to 300 people leads by a Batin, the village headman. The Batin is normally elected from a very influential people like the shaman or halaq. They have been variously described as a mixed Mongoloid-Australoid population (Coon and Hunt, 1966). They are largely animists, but today there are also Semai who profess Christianity and Islam. However, they are still influenced by their old beliefs and customs. They reside in areas ranging from hill jungle to urban fringes. A smaller number live in larger towns and are more integrated into a Malay life-style. Today the Semai community at Pos Dipang Perak are more open-minded people and are friendly to the outsiders as well as technology. Years back most of the village folks lived in crippling poverty without clean running water, proper educational aid and electricity supply. However, at present, a large number of the houses have the basic amenities such as electricity and clean water. Their children today attend the government (Tadika Kemas) kindergarten and a primary school nearby. For the secondary school goers, Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli (JHEOA) provides a transport service to send and fetch them from the secondary schools in Kampar and Batu Gajah Perak.

JHEOA plays a very important role in protecting the Orang Asli and their ancestral lands from being exploited by the outsiders. In Pos Dipang, the government has built houses with basic amenities to them. The government housing scheme for the poor (PPRT) houses were built for the Semai convenience. The Semai today have also benefitted from the existence of technology like computers, hand phones, astros and dvds that are rapidly entering into their traditional lifestyles. The effort to document the Semai cultures, heritage, way of life and folklories are scarce. Therefore, this research aimed to document the orang asli cultures and heritage as meticulously as possible. This document is hoped to help the Semai community in the preservation of their own culture and heritage.

3. Method

This study is qualitative in nature. The oral history technique is entrusted in carrying out this research project on the oral literature of the Semai community in Pos Dipang Perak. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people’s testimony about their own experiences. It is both a research technique and a method of preserving history. It provides a method to research personal perspectives and gather detailed information on a wide range of subjects. It provides one way to uncover the kind of history that often goes unwritten. As a method of historical and cultural documentation, oral history provides a way to preserve the kind of verbal information and storytelling which has existed since before recorded history.

Oral history is viewed as the recording and storage of interviews scheduled with selected individuals who are able to tell the memory recall and help in the reconstruction of the past (Charlton, 1985). Precisely, oral history is the collection and recording of personal memoirs as historical documentation. It documents forms of discourse normally not documented and it emphasizes the significance of human experience. It is a particularly useful way to capture ordinary people’s lived experiences. From the interviews, the researchers will get firsthand knowledge of the subject. The true impact of oral history comes through personal memory.

Hence, oral history is accepted as a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting historical information through recorded interviews with people, communities and participants in past events and ways of life. Those interviewed do not have to be famous or of historical importance. They can be everyday people talking about their ordinary lives. Collecting, preserving and sharing oral histories not only transmit knowledge from one generation to the next, it enhances our understanding of the past by illuminating personal experience. In this
research, oral history was applied to gather, preserve and interpret the stories from the Semai mainly on their
golden tales, ghost stories, and shamanism rituals.

In this study, interviews were the main procedure used and were carried out during several visits to the
settlement. Each participant was interviewed individually. The participants were asked to reiterate the stories that
have been passed down to them from generation to generation and that they have also passed them down to the
present young generations. The interview sessions were tape-recorded as to ensure explicit information was
secured. The collected data were inductively analyzed, so as to visualize the multiple realities

3.1. Participants

The participants were the Semai people who lived at Pos Dipang settlement, Batu Gajah, Perak Darul
Ridzuan. The selection process of participants was based on snowball sampling which is one of the common
forms of purposeful sampling in qualitative research. Furthermore, the researchers did not know exactly who to
interview to gather the data. The researchers chose the Tok Batin as the first interviewee, then, the snowball got
bigger. Sampling is recommended until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached (Lincoln, and Guba, 1985).
Thus, the researchers decided to stop at the seventh nominee when no new information was forthcoming. The
nominated elders were those who had understood much of the local folktales, traditions and practices and able to
provide reliable information.

3.2. Data analysis

The recorded stories served as entry points to reflect, interpret, note, and describe Aboriginal peoples’
epistemologies. The stories were treated as data and subjected to a content analysis that tracked the process and
scope of emerging insights (Patton, 1980). The transcribed stories ranged from two to five pages in length. The
text of each story was re-read and labeled by category, and patterns between categories and across stories were
considered. The stories were then subjected to a second critical reading and the themes were exhaustively
compared to the emerging categories and considered for applicability. The suitability of the properties within
each subcategory determined their relevance (Avdi, 2005; Johnstone and Johnstone, 2005).

4. Results and discussion

The qualitative content analysis inductively revealed one main category of knowledge that was being passed
down from generation to generation through oral practice which is the Semai people’s beliefs. Oral tradition is
the mean used from generation to generation to educate the community about their beliefs. The Semai people’s
beliefs constitute of four different subcategories namely; the spirit of Sewang (Gunik), the supremacy of animals,
the almighty sense of nature, and the continuance of life after death.

4.1. The spirit of Sewang (Gunik)

The concept of faith (god or protector) is very much associated with the belief in the supernatural power.
Religious life for the Semai is a mixture of animism and traditional beliefs. This can be clearly seen in the
Sewang (shamanism) rituals. In the Sewang story, it explains the Semai’s dependency on the supernatural power
as a healing power and protector. During the Sewang ceremonies, it is the time for the villagers to gather that is
when someone is terminally ill and seek help from the shaman. The shaman will communicate with Gunik, the
supernatural power, to heal the patient during the Sewing ritual. This means asking the Gunik for protection so
that, the people can live in peace and be healthy. On top of that, their farm and cattle are well protected.
The Semai believe that *Gunik* is dominant in their life as the *gunik* speaks through his human "father" and is sent into the body of the patient to search out the cause of illness. The spirit (*Gunik*) entry into the body of the patient is very common in aboriginal cultures around the world (Dentan, 1979). This is evident in the *Sewang* story. The spirit of *Gunik* will enter the body of the shaman. In simple understanding, the shaman communicates with the spirit to explain the type of help seeks from the *Gunik*. As a mediator, he can request the spirit to heal the illnesses of the village folk or request for safety and peacefulness. Often, the shaman seeks for protection and prevention from threat and danger. Hence, the people can live in peace and be healthy. This helps seeking from the *Gunik* explains their beliefs in the supernatural power and their concept that they can wish anything from *Gunik*. *Gunik* is like the creator of health and wealth to them. Special or respected names such as *Puteri Mayang Mengurai*, *Datuk Panglima Jingga* and *Datok* are used to address the *Gunik* as a way to show their respect to it. Their extreme belief in *Gunik* and shamanism reveals their concept of religion or faith that binds them together as a community.

4.2. The supremacy of the animals

Animals in the Semai community are respected and worshipped as they are considered as the elements that give warnings or certain hidden messages to the people of any disaster that may occur such as flood. The message can appear through dreams received by the dominant person in the community such as *halaq*. For example, *halaq*’s dream of the presence of dragons bathing in the river nearby was perceived as sending a clear message of the upcoming danger. The dragon is seen as a sign of disaster or misfortune that will happen in the village. Dog is another animal that has also gained due respect from the people. They believe that this animal can protect them from the *geget* ghost. *Geget* is a so called ‘strangler ghost’ or unwanted spirit. It is one evil ghost that can harm just anyone who happens to be in open air or outside of their house or shelter when it makes its appearance in the village. The whole village would just drop everything that they are doing at the moment, and seek shelter at home when they hear the shrieking sound of *geget* that mark its appearance. It will fly over the village while making the shrieking sound. *Geget* can cause some kind of terminal illness. The Semai believe that a dog’s bark can scare away the *geget* ghost. Thus, at the time the village is visited by the ghost, the Semai will pull the dog’s ear. It is believed that the dog’s scream would frighten and shun the ‘strangler ghost’ away. This portrays that the Semai need the animals to protect them from danger.

4.3. The almighty sense of nature

The mother nature is a scared place to the Semai. They deem themselves inferior to the nature and they have great respects towards its well beings, such as the river and jungle. This is because these beings are the Semai main sources for food. They believe that if they do not have the respect and preserve these elements of nature they will not be blessed by the cosmos. The Semai believe that the spirit of the jungle would always watch and observe them whenever they are in the jungle itself. They must be respectful in actions when they are in the jungle, otherwise the spirits will harm them. In the jungle, one has to be very quiet and respectful. *Nyanyik Chep* is feared by many. It portrays itself like an old lady with long white hair. The worst effect of encountering with *Nyanyik Chep* is one can become crazy. One would feel like being disturbed at all time and it can make one cries without reasons at night. Therefore, there are some restrictions that they have to observe when they are in the jungle. These restrictions are then being passed down from one generation to another in a way to educate the youngsters. The most important thing is one has to be humble whenever hunting in the jungle. Observe the actions as well as verbal act. To be specific, one has to be quiet to demonstrate respect to the cosmos.
4.4. The continuance of life after death

The Semai consider the graveyard as a sacred place for the dead. The Semai have a different view of the afterlife. They believe in the spirit of the dead. They believe that the Semai who have passed away would still live in the community. To them the dead Semai will become Kikmot or graveyard ghost to disturb peace in the village. Their spirits continue to wander there and can disturb the passersby if they are not given due respect. The spirit of the dead can still harm the living. The story of Kikmot ghost tells about the mysterious body pain after a visit to the graveyard. The Semai believe that the dead can still hurt the living by causing them misery and pain in their health and life. Thus, the dead must be respected. The relatives of the dead would seek the shaman help as not to let the dead body feel unrest and start straying in the village

5. Conclusion

The findings of the research revealed that the Semai’s strong beliefs in spirits and supernatural beings dominate Semai’s daily lives. The need to appease these spirits is mandatory in their day to day life. They worship mythological creatures, such as dragons as well as real animals such as snakes or dogs, in hope they would protect the land and their people. Their world view of the environment and nature also encompasses their beliefs in life as well as their society’s identity.

The Semai oral traditions have its own moral and transitions into which symbolize themselves which are the significant elements in the embodiment of their cultural and spiritual lifestyle. Their folktales have rich values of teachings which have been passed down from one generation to another. Each of the stories documented represents fluid, situational narratives which encroached with their beliefs. The Semai have preserved the important parts of their own cultures which is the belief systems from the surrounding cultures. The stories are testimonies to the importance that elders invest in the teaching of Semai traditional beliefs and to nurture a greater sense of Semai’s self-identity.

The folktales are entity points for researchers to reflexively transcribe, interpret, describe and further appreciate the Semai’s oral tradition. For many decades, the oral tradition has served as an important teaching tool for the younger generations. The children are educated by their parents, who model cultural practices which they inherited from their ancestors. The core values espoused throughout the oral traditions of folktales provide continuity in nurturing the Semai’s beliefs. Through the stories the elders reveal spiritual and social teaching in culturally significant terms. To conclude, the stories of the elders are the principal means for the cross-generational transferor of knowledge to illuminate Semai people’s beliefs, experiences and identity.

References


