

Rongeh: A Skin Disease in West Sumatra: Its Cultural Categories and Traditional Healing Method

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Very often medical anthropologist discover that traditional healers have own cultural categories in order to describe certain medical disorder. In this article the authors illustrate the case of a skin disease with the name *rongeh* as an exemplary case which should show the healing procedure of a traditional healer in West Sumatra. Sometimes the healing method of a doctor of Western biomedicine is ineffective which could be due to the negligence of incorporating cultural categories. The medical anthropologist tries to integrate an emic point of view of the traditional healer and enable so a new viewpoint of a disease.

Key Words: Cultural categories – *Rongeh* - West Sumatra – traditional healing

Introduction

In the highlands of West Sumatra there is still a huge area which is covered by dense jungle. Inside of this forest there are plants and woods which could be used in the daily life of the people. The tree which is called *rongeh* is no exception. It is a long tree with wood of good quality (Figure 1). This wood can be used for the production of furniture. However there is some kind of danger. If someone comes into contact with the sap or the seed of the tree the skin of that person can become infected.

On the skin of the infected person appear red dot at the infected place and the skin becomes itchy. In severe cases the face becomes swollen. Many patients consult doctors with a Western biomedical background. However this treatment is often ineffective. As a consequence the patients have to look for another kind of treatment outside the frame of Western biomedicine. The kind of treatment which is used within a Minangkabau community is illustrated here both from an etic and emic point of view. A simple definition of the term ‘emic’ could look as follows: ...the epistemological perspective of the investigated, or the ‘insider point of view’; contrasted with etic. (Erickson & Murphy, 2008, p. 233).

If we consider the emic point of view then it requires the etic (outsiders) view as well (Goodenough, 2009, p. 112). In this article it is tried to illustrate a complete picture of the healing methods of *rongeh* as far as it is possible. However some

secret esoteric knowledge was not given to the researchers.


Objective and Hypothesis

In this paper the researchers to describe the traditional healing method of the disease of *rongeh*. In Western biomedicine there is no mentioning of a medical disorder which is called *rongeh*. However in the traditional medicine there is a kind of skin disease which is called *rongeh* and refers to the *rongeh* tree. One of the main objectives is to describe how to heal it. This part is descriptive and explorative as there are no research publications about this disorder so far. Nonetheless there are two major hypotheses:

There are indigenous concepts of diseases/disorders with its own ways of treatment which could be more effective (in special cases) than Western biomedicine.

The traditional healer still plays a role within the village community. Regarding the objective, it looks as follows:

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The description of *rongeh* is an exemplary case and it could be done in many other cases throughout the world too. An emic description could help to get a better understanding of this disease and enables for the researcher to get an understanding of parts of the world view of the Minangkabau people.

It has to be stressed that there is so far no mentioning of *rongeh* in the literature. There is one major work which described the traditional Minangkabau medical system and which was written more than one century ago. Kleiweg de Zwaan wrote a huge part about skin infections in West Sumatra. He described more than 10 diseases however *rongeh* was not mentioned (Kleiweg de Zwaan, 1912, p.167). If we look at the various treatment methods which were described by Kleiweg de Zwaan then we will see that treatment of *kudis* (Scabies) uses some medicinal plants which we will find in the treatment

of *rongeh* too. The list looks as follows (in the writing of Kleiweg de Zwaan):

- *Tuba aka(r)* (bot. *Derris elliptica*)
- *Si-Tawar* (Bot. *Costus speciosus*)
- A kind of stinging nettle
- In some places: leaves of *gulinggang* (sic.) (bot. *Cassia Alata*)
- *Dammar*
- Honey
- Sulphur
- Pepper
- In some places: juice of *kurkuma* and coconut oil (Kleiweg de Zwaan, 1912, p. 169).

Scabies is caused by a mite and the main aim is to eliminate it. The leaves of the first three (four) types will be boiled in water and then the other ingredients will be added. This kind of paste will be rubbed on the skin (Kleiweg de Zwaan, 1912, p. 169).



Figure 1: The rongeh tree

Research Method and Research Setting

This research was conducted in one village community in the highlands of West Sumatra. It is a case study in which the authors try to describe the way how one healer acts. The highland of West Sumatra is famous for the Minangkabau. The Minangkabau form probably the largest matrilineal society of the world (Metje, 1995, p.23), with around 5 million people (Heider, 2011).

During the research process unstructured open interviews were conducted with the healer. There was no direct research question at the beginning. The researchers observed the healer and tried to illustrate the healing process. The research method followed the principles which were mentioned by Reichertz:

... two collection principles: (1) the researcher, in respect (only) of the facts to be investigated, should enter the field as naively as possible and collect data.... (2) Particularly in the entry phase it should be ensured that the data collection will be as unstructured as possible. (Reichertz, 2004, p. 579)

The researchers had no idea about the healing at the beginning and therefore it made sense to start quite unstructured. Only step by step the research became more structured after analyzing the first data material. In this village community there is only one healer who is able to heal this disease even though there are different types of healers within this village. We can call this type of healer 'specialist' as he is merely treating *rongeh*. In one interview the healer himself stressed this fact when he was asked about the treatment of another famous disorder:

Itu lain penyakitnya. Saya tidak pandai tentang obat itu (translation: This is another disease. I do not (can not) know its medication. Interview June 7th, 2014).

For the further research it had to be considered that the medical anthropologists differentiate between disease and illness. Both terms can be defined as follows:

A key axiom in medical anthropology is the dichotomy between two aspects of sickness: disease and illness. Disease refers to malfunction and/or psychological processes, while the term illness refers to the psychosocial experience and meaning of a perceived disease (Kleinman, 1980, p.72).

We can use the term 'disease' in the case of *rongeh* as the skin of the patients has a malfunction. The symptoms are like already mentioned: Red dots appear at the infected place of the skin and parts of the skin become itchy. In severe cases the face can become swollen.

The main informant was Marwan¹. He is the specialist in the treatment of *rongeh*. Many people

consult him when they are suspicious that they are infected with *rongeh*.

RONGEH: A Brief Overview

The skin of a person that comes in contact with the sap or seed of the *rongeh* tree can become infected. The situation of the infected person can deteriorate so that the patient can hardly stand the situation. The healer himself distinguishes between different types of *rongeh*:

- a) *Rongeh Air* (Water *rongeh*): The seeds of the *rongeh* tree flow on the water of the river or drains. A person can become infected when he washes his hand or face by using this type of water.
- b) *Rongeh jaring labah-labah* (*Rongeh* related to a cobweb): The seeds of the *rongeh* tree can fly in the air. These seeds can become entangled in a cobweb. If a person passes by and comes into touch with such a kind of cobweb then he can get *rongeh*.
- c) *Rongeh* from the contact with the sap of the tree. If someone comes into contact with the sap of the tree then this person can become infected by *rongeh*. This is the worst type and the symptoms will appear after three days.
- d) *Rongeh* if someone burns the *rongeh* tree. A person can come into contact with its smoke and then can become infected.

There are other features which must be considered if we look at *rongeh*.

- *Rongeh* is caused by germs (*kuman*). The healer stresses this fact by saying:
Kalau merebah kuman dalam badan kita ya lama sakit [dan] sembuhnya. [translation: If the germs lie down on our body, ya then the illness lasts long (and also) its healing]. (Interview June 6th, 2014)
- If we consider the emic point of view then we have to know that the *rongeh* trees are inhabited by some kind of *jinn*. This is very important for the treatment of *rongeh*.
...kalau kita obati orang yang sakit itu berarti kita mengusir dia (the *jinn*) [translation: If we treat a person who is sick that means that we cast him (the *jinn*) out]. (Interview June 6th 2014)
- The illness of *rongeh* can 'pindah' (move). It can be transferred to the children or grandchildren of the patient. Therefore the healer and the patient need the *tanda* that the treatment took place. This can be a glass or plate:

Aa kalau tanda tu kita tak sakit jadinya kalau tak dikasi tanda sembuh...penyakit itu pindah pada

cucu...[translation: Aa if the sign that we are not ill if we do not give it as a sign of cure...the disease moves to the grandchild...](Interview June 7th, 2014).

The healer must consider the first two points during the healing method and consider the third point at the end. Both disturbing elements must be cured. The medicinal plants are used for healing the plants. The *jinn* must be convinced not to disturb the infected person any more. According to the healer he can contact the *jinn* during his sleep (dream) and try to convince him to leave or if this is not possible then he uses a certain spell which cast the *jinn*^{out2}. At the end of the healing process the patient must give a glass or plate which are a sign that the healing took place. Then the infection will not affect the following generations.

The Prevention and Healing Method

Here we have to differentiate between precautionary matters and the actual treatment.

The Prevention of Becoming Infected

Workers or other people who need to go to the forest can take some precautionary matters in order not to



become infected. In this case the healer will make a kind of ‘talisman’ (*tangkal*). Actually it is a kind of paste which will be used as a protective method. Especially workers who go into the forest and want to cut parts of the *rongeh* tree consult the healer. The protective creme consists of the following ingredients:





- Different kinds of Lemons *limau*: *Limau Kapek* (Bot. CitrusAuratifolia), *Limau Sundai*
- *Gasung tungga* (a plant which looks like *bawang putih besar* – a big garlic)
- *Urek Dusuan Aka*.

The skin will be peeled from the *limau* and boil and then boiled with hot water and finally mixed with the other ingredients. Then all will be boiled with hot water. After the whole thing is cooled down the fluid in between can be rubbed on the skin and the workers can take it to the forest.

The Treatment

If someone who is infected with *rongeh* consults the healer then it is his first duty to collect the necessary ingredients. These are the ingredients:

Ingredients for the treatment of <i>rongeh</i>	Photo of the plants
Isi Kunyit (Bot. Curcuma domestica)	
Daun Anau Pucuknya	

<p>Dammar and Daun Jantung Pisang(which fell down) (Bot.Musa Paradisiaca)</p>	
<p>Daun Galinggang (Bot. Casia Alata)</p>	
<p>Daun Aka(r) Kalisimange</p>	
<p>Daun tubuah aka(r) sama dusun tungga</p>	

The ingredients will be cut into small pieces and then grinded with a stone. After that these ingredients will be put together into a pot. Only from the root of *dusun tungga* the healer puts in the sap of the root.

These ingredients will be boiled until there is a kind of fluid which will be cooled down. The infected part of the skin will be lubricated with the medication.



Figure 2: The medication after the boiling

During the time of the treatment the patient should take a shower with warm water. If the treatment is successful then the patient should take a bath with *hemepdu tanah* leaves (bot. *Andrographis paniculata*). After that the patient can take a bath as usual. The patient must give also a sign (*tanda*) to the healer so that the treatment comes to an end.

During the research the scientists witnessed that treatment was quite successful. Already after two days the infected area disappeared. An interesting plant is *galinggang* (bot. *Casia Alata*) which is famous worldwide for its usage as a biological antibiotic³. In other areas of the world it is used against fungal infections and the people have to rub the infected place (Hirt / M'Pia, 2001). There is the possibility that *Casia Alata* plays an important role in the treatment of *rongeh*.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the above mentioned treatment it was tried to look at a disorder of the skin which could often not be treated by a biomedical doctor. Most of the patients consulted a Western educated doctor before they went to the traditional healer. According to the interviewees the doctor prescribed some antibiotics for the infected skin but the infection appeared again after some days. On the other side the traditional medicine uses a medication from plants. For further researches it would be useful to look in laboratories about the consistency of the plants and the final medication. It has to be checked whether this medication could be useful in other cases too.

However it has to be stressed that the researchers considered an emic view. If we look at this then we can see that there are two major causes for *rongeh*: a) *kuman* (germs) and b) a kind of *jinn*. For the people the belief in these creatures is important and only the healer knows how to deal with them. He must convince the *jinn* not to disturb the patient. One important element which was just mentioned in this article is the use of a special spell. The healer learns this spell from his father and he is only willing to teach it to his family or his direct students. If we include the emic point of view then we can say that the Western biomedicine does not try to control the *jinn*. A successful healing method must include the worldview of the people. The knowledge of the plants and the invocations gives the healer a kind of power and authority. The patients trust him. The healing process is very often successful however not always. In very rare cases (only one unsuccessful case was observed by the researchers) the healing is not successful and then the healer uses other plants⁴.

As a concluding remark it can be said that the knowledge of the traditional healers is still important and the task of the medical anthropologists is to preserve this knowledge and if possible work in an interdisciplinary way with botanists whether these plants could be used as healing plants. This could be a source of income for the healer and the village. The research of the medical anthropologist helps to get an understanding of the local people. Here we saw that a creature is related to the *rongeh* tree and that the people had to be careful whenever they enter the forest. The healer uses his own categories of different

types of *rongeh*. For him the most important element is to find out how the patient was infected. Was he infected by accidentally walking through a cobweb? Or was he infected when he tried to fell a tree? For him a patient was more severely infected when he 'deliberately' disturbed the *jinn*. The emic point of view unveils such a local point of view with its own understanding.

Notes

1. The name is a pseudonym in order to protect the privacy of the healer.
2. The healer was not willing to tell the researchers this spell as it is his own esoteric knowledge.
3. For a detailed report about this plant see Tropical Plant Database.
4. In such a case the following local plants are added by the healer: *kelupak jantung pisang*, *daun kerinci* and *daun sipensi*.

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