PATTERNS OF SUPERNATURAL PREMISES UNDERLYING THE INSTITUTION OF THE BOMOH IN MALAY CULTURE

The heterogeneity of traditions which make up the culture of the Peninsular Malays and the complexity of the total fabric of the culture woven from strands of diverse civilizations past and present have drawn the attention of many scholars of Malay society and culture. Scholars of Sir Richard Winstedt's generation have tackled these phenomena mainly from the historical point of view, providing historical backgrounds and origins to the different component elements which make up the present-day culture of the Malays. It is important to know the nature of the historical background to the culture, for much of the present has to be explained in terms of the past. But equally important is to explain how and to what extent the different traditions are integrated meaningfully or otherwise within the framework of an on-going cultural system. A number of recent scholars have addressed themselves to this question either specifically or tangentially. Anthropological studies on single Malay communities would have to touch on this sort of problem, especially where it concerns beliefs, customs and social values. Robert J. Wolff, in an article on the acceptance of modern medicine in rural Malay society, compares the different traditions in Malay culture with a cupboard, usually found in wealthier Malay homes, which exhibits an array of odds and ends. According to him,

Perhaps Malay culture is like that, it is the cupboard in which are stored all the gifts from other cultures, not arranged in any particular way. There is no connection between the items on one shelf and those on the next — or even linkage among the items on a shelf. But they are all the possessions of one person.¹

Others have seen an irreconcilable conflict between elements of disparate traditions in Malay culture, particularly where it concerns the opposition of Islam as the official religion to the retentions consisting

of inherited beliefs and practices of past ages. Thus Prof. de Josselin de Jong describes the conflict between Adat Perpatih of Negeri Sembilan and Hukum Shara' (Islamic Law) as one "between two systems of ideals and practices, both of which were considered by the society concerned as being an integral of its culture, both applicable to the entire society, and both perceived as a system by inhabitants of that society." 2

However there have also been attempts to show that despite apparent conflicts and discrepancies on the surface, it might be possible to find some structural and conceptual order and consistency in the integration of the different cultural derivations in Malay culture. Apart from my own work, 3 a recent book by K. M. Endicott attempts to show that there exists a structural organization in the world-view of Malay magical theories and practices. 4 My own work demonstrates that although Malay folk beliefs and rituals are made up of elements of diverse origins, they form meaningful units or cult institutions which are based on ideological premises familiar to the culture. Historical background of the different component elements also helps to explain the characteristics these elements take in integrating with other elements. Endicott's work is a detailed analysis of the complex structural relationships between the material world and the supernatural realm that can be extracted from the symbolic and expressive rituals and spells found in the literature on Malay magic published so far. Although the work is based entirely on published works, and the writer did not have a first-hand knowledge of the culture of which the magical tradition is only a small part, it is an important work for it represents the first attempt to analyse in depth the structure of an aspect of Malay world-view. The assumption posed by Endicott and myself in our works is that despite the differences in traditions, the component items in Malay culture, even if they are apparently opposed to one another, have an underlying meaningful order and an analysable relationship among themselves within the world-view of the culture.

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4 Endicott, Kirk Michael, An Analysis of Malay Magic, Oxford Univ. Press, 1970. By world-view, I mean the system of ideas which members of a culture hold about things around them. In other words, it is the way things are pictured or conceived by them as a "reality".
What this paper hopes to do is to examine the institution of the *bomoh*, the traditional practitioner of Malay folk medicine. Perhaps there is no other social institution in Malay culture today which enjoys a longer continuity and yet is fully functional in everyday life when compared to the institution of *bomoh*. In it, one is able to see cultural accretions from the earliest period of the Malays’ history to the present. It therefore offers us an opportunity to see how elements from the different traditions feature within a single institution. The aim is to see whether or not the patterns of supernatural premises underlying the notion of the work of the *bomoh* are consistent within themselves and consonant with the general belief system of the culture.

The total belief system in Malay culture today can be graphically pictured as interactions between Islamic ideals, inherited traditional beliefs and empirical or scientific knowledge which form the three points — A, B and C — of a hypothetical triangle:

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  A  Islamic Ideals
 /   /
/     /
|     |
B Inherited Traditional Beliefs
 /   /
/     /
|     |
C Empirical or scientific knowledge
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On the ideal level, as typical of a Muslim community everywhere, prescribed Islamic teachings and practices are the paramount goals towards which members of the community are supposed to strive. But on the behavioural level, the Islamic ideals have to contend with local beliefs or *adat* as well as scientific knowledge which, in the case of most Muslim communities, is mainly brought about by the process of westernisation of their cultures (although a great deal of modern sciences have their roots in the Islamic civilisation). An example of the interaction between Islamic ideals and westernisation (line AC) can be shown in a situation where the modern banking system, which is an essential part of the economic development of developing countries, comes into conflict with the Islamic law on interests. Such a conflict may be resolved by an interpretation given as a *fatwa* (ruling) by a

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\(^5\) This diagram is presented here mainly for convenience. It represents the ideal situation only. In actual everyday happening, it is possible to get elements of A + B standing in opposition to C, elements of B and C combining harmoniously together and so on.
consensus of scholars. The interaction between Islamic ideals and local traditional beliefs (line AB) is a constant feature of a Muslim community. An injunction may be made in the name of Islam prohibiting the practice of a certain local custom; or certain reinterpretations are made so as to give "Islamic" meaning to a local belief; or it is possible that traditional local beliefs and rites continue to live on as an "informal" belief system fulfilling the pragmatic and immediate needs of day-to-day living side by side with the "formal" religion which serves the more transcendental needs. The interaction between traditional beliefs and scientific knowledge (line BC) is exemplified in the problem of modern medicine having to compete with traditional medicine and concept of health.

Ideally, the institution of bomoh stands at point C of our triangle, but in practice, it is anywhere along line AB. It is, however, in constant interaction with the other two points. But its interaction with each of the other two points is of a different nature. With point A, the interaction is mostly on the plane of supernatural premises. While the institution of bomoh had as its origin theories and concepts regarding illnesses and their cure based on animistic premises, it now has to contend with the teachings of monotheistic Islam where ill health or otherwise emanates only from the Almighty. It is within this context that we get the patterns of supernatural premises rationalising the institution of bomoh: on the one hand it is based on the Old Indonesian beliefs in semangat and spirits and on the other it is drawn towards a position where it is conceived as being consonant with the teachings of Islam. But the whole picture would reveal to us the traditional Malay world-view in regard to the causation, nature and the cure of illnesses.

The interaction on line BC is entirely of a different nature. The problem here really is the introduction to and acceptance of modern medicine based on empirical or scientific knowledge in a culture whose traditional medical premises are entirely different. Thus, a Malay lady doctor who had first hand experience of the problem lamented the fact that her people, especially the rural population, were slow in accepting scientific medical treatment because they were still steadfastly holding on to traditional beliefs, customs and social values. She was hopeful,

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6 It may even be at a point BC, for it is known, although never admitted, that some bomohs surreptitiously make use of patent medicine and powdered aspirin pills.

however, that “in time to come, scientific medical thinking will completely replace the ancient beliefs and superstitions.” The problem is actually not medical in nature but cultural. Thus Wolff recognises that to make Western scientific medicine to be truly accepted, “it is necessary to acquaint the people not only with modern tools, more efficient techniques, but with a new and acceptable way of thinking about disease, about causation of disease, about treatment of disease.” 8 However, where it concerns Malay culture, Wolff thinks that it is “doubly difficult” to introduce Western medicine because of the very nature of the Malay culture itself. According to him,  

... the introduction of Western medical services to the Malays is difficult not just because there is a conflict of cultures — it is perhaps doubly difficult because the elements of our Western medical subculture are bound together in a meaningful, causal, logical sequence, whereas Malay culture does not recognise any such kind of order, except the order he perceives in the world around him, an order which is the harmony between not necessarily related phenomena.9 

A lecturer in social medicine, Dr. Paul C. Y. Chen, who addresses himself to the same problem, however, sees the problem as arising from a lack in cultural communications between the modern medical practitioners and the rural Malays. He ventures that “the various elements in rural Malay culture form strongly coherent patterns, and supply an internally consistent explanation for all that happens, which is reassuring to the rural Malay.” 10 Thus, unless modern medicine can form part of the “coherent culture patterns” of the rural Malays, it will not be easily accepted by them. 

It is a fact that modern medicine has come to stay in Malay culture, but the problem of introducing it speedily and effectively to the rural Malays is very real. Much of the answer may be found in the traditional Malay world-view regarding illnesses and their cure, and no other institution in the culture which is more relevant to the question than that of the bomoh. Embedded in the world-view regarding the work of the bomoh are the Malays’ traditional concepts of the causation, nature and treatment of diseases. It is therefore useful for us to see what are the patterns of the assumptions regarding the supernatural which govern the office of the Malay bomoh.

9 Ibid., p. 345.
An ordinary Malay is generally aware of the distinction between what is approved by Islamic teachings and what belongs to the realm of folk beliefs. Similarly, he is aware of the distinction between traditional or folk medicine as represented by the bomoh and modern western medicine as represented by the doctors, dressers, hospitals, travelling clinics and rural government midwives. It is usual to hear the Malay villagers talking about “ubat chara lama” (old style of medicine) or “keperchayaan orang tua-tua” (old beliefs) in contradistinction to “ubat orang puteh” (white man’s medicine) or “ajaran Islam” (Islamic teachings). But he may not know for sure where the demarcation line really is when it comes to folk beliefs and Islamic teachings. In a Muslim community in Selangor where a field study was conducted recently, reference was often made by the villagers to those who are pious and knowledgeable in religious matters as opposed to the ordinary people who only know the basic requirements of being Muslims. The former are often referred to as “ahli agama” or “orang masjid”, and it is they who would be relied upon to tell with some degree of authority what is approved and what is not from the Islamic point of view. Even the bomoh may speak of his vocation defensively and refers to the belief in spirits as “keperchayaan karut” (spurious beliefs). Or he would resort to various ways of rationalising his practice so as to make it consonant with Islamic traditions. However, although the bomoh is being hemmed in from both sides, Islamic teachings on one side and modern medical knowledge on the other, the need for bomoh continues to be felt not only among the village folk but also among the town dwellers. Not a few well-known bomohs have built up their reputation through services rendered to the town people, and such bomohs’ clientele usually includes non-Malays as well. It is clear that as long as there exist human problems or ailments which religion or modern medicine cannot satisfactorily solve, such social institution as that of the bomoh will continue to flourish.

In a Malay village community, the bomoh exists side by side with the imam, and what he stands for coexists with the Muslim code of

12 Zainal Abidin Sulong, “The work of Bomor in Kelantan,” academic exercise, University of Malaya (Dept. of Malay Studies), 1957, p. 6.
13 A detailed study of one such bomoh is found in Mohd. Ghazali bin Hj. Maulud, “Sa-orang Bomoh Melayu: Satu Kajian Tentang Chara Perubatan dan Ilmu-nya,” academic exercise, University of Malaya (Dept. of Malay Studies), 1968.
belief and practice. Conflicts do arise, but these may be resolved by reinterpretations, although the more religious members of the community would not normally associate themselves with the work of the bomoh.\textsuperscript{14} The situation in a village community is usually fluid, for the bomoh may turn out to be a person recognised for his piety and religious knowledge. But such a person, although admitting he is a bomoh, would always claim that his practice is consonant with Islamic teachings. Two of the three bomohs mentioned in the study on a Muslim community in Selangor cited just now were recognised as belonging to the category of “ahli agama” in their community. However, there are bomohs who are better known for their possession of esoteric ilmu which only they themselves can explain. Others claim that they have aksan (familiars) to help them in their work. The well-known royal bomoh of Kelantan, Pak Nik Abdul Rahman, insists that his ilmu is based on the philosophy of the wayang kulit (ilmu perwayangan).\textsuperscript{15} Because of the periphery nature of the bomoh’s ilmu and his ambiguous status in a Malay community, the attitude towards the bomoh, as pointed out by Michael Swift, is usually ambivalent.\textsuperscript{16} The bomoh is an indispensable figure in a Malay village: in fact, without a bomoh, the village community is felt to be incomplete. But it is also a common belief among Malays that however large a bomoh’s earnings are, they cannot bring him happiness or riches because his ilmu is hot (panas). And moreover since a bomoh may traffic with those forces of evil, his end will come on his deathbed in a painfully lingering manner.

It should be borne in mind too that Islam recognises the existence of magic (sihr), but the practice is forbidden because it is regarded as the work of evil creatures such as the devil (shaitan or iblis) and the “infidel jin”. The place of bomoh in a Malay community is not to be looked at as an institution outside the character of the community as a Muslim community, but rather as part of it. Sometimes a ceremony propitiating the spirits conducted by the bomoh is even concluded with a religious prayer (doa), and when this happens, the imam has to give his cooperation. The imam and the bomoh in a Malay village community

\textsuperscript{14} For example, see Fraser Jr., Thomas M., Ruzemblan: A Malay Fishing Village in Southern Thailand, Cornell University Press, 1960, pp. 189-191.

\textsuperscript{15} Recorded interview with the writer. Simply put, the lamp, the screen (kelir), the puppets and the dalang correspond with people (puppets), life (screen), sun or energy (lamp) and the bomoh (dalang). To be able to control and manipulate the puppets in a wayang performance is analogous to having a knowledge of life and people.

thus represent two worlds of supernatural beliefs represented by points A and B on our triangle. The two need not always be conflicting; in fact, they are often complementary to one another. While the imam is important in matters pertaining to religion, especially where it concerns the salvation of one’s soul in the next world, the bomoh is an important member of the community whose services in dealing with everyday immediate problems, especially in the healing of sickness, are much sought after. The “Ninety-Nine Laws” of Perak, an eighteenth century compilation of the customary laws of the state, postulates that the villagers must not only feed the district judge and the officials of the mosque, but also the magician and the midwife. The code also lays down the code of conduct, the duties and the fees of the pawang. It is said that as “the muezzin is king in the mosque, the magician is king in the house of the sick, in the rice-field and on the mine.”

The institution of bomoh is built upon elements from diverse traditions, indigenous as well as foreign. The ilmu of the bomoh is not wholly based on supernatural premises such as the control and manipulation of semangat, communication with spiritual beings or the use of objects with extraordinary powers. A good deal of the ilmu is made up of the knowledge of herbs and poisons, bloodletting, bone setting, humoral pathology or simple hygiene. But the ilmu is not what makes a bomoh a bomoh: it is more on the qualities ascribed by the culture to the office occupied by a person that causes one to be accepted as a bomoh. Even the spells and rituals performed by the bomoh are not so much his ilmu or something personally attributed to him, but rather they are an inheritance from the past or a revelation communicated in a

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18 The terms pawang and bomoh are often used interchangeably. But in most places, the term bomoh refers to the specialist whose main vocation is healing, while pawang refers to a more versatile practitioner of magic endowed with many talents. In Kelantan, and among the Malays in South Thailand, the term bomoh seems to be the general term used, although the term pawang is also known. An ordinary Malay may generally draw the distinction between the functions of the pawang and bomoh, but he tends to place both the specialists into one common institution of his culture mainly because he regards their practices as commonly belonging to a domain of inherited traditions from the past. Both the pawang and bomoh rely on the same lore of spirit beliefs provided by their culture. Their institution in Malay folk culture is basically one, but it is necessary sometimes to draw a distinction in their functions: bomoh as the specialist in folk medicine and pawang as the general practitioner of magic.
10 Winstedt, “More Notes on Malay Magic.”
dream. In other words, it is the institution rather than the person or his ilmu which is significant for the bomoh in the eyes of his culture.

The prototype of the present day bomoh must be the shaman of the old Indonesian civilization. It is by examining the institution itself that we may get the general ideas underlying the supernatural premises of the bomoh's office. The need to give the office an Islamic character usually leads to a claim that the institution has an Islamic genesis. Most Malay bomohs ascribe the origin of their office to the legendary figure of Luqman al-Hakim. Oral tales and legends accounting such genesis also cite Hindu deities and indigenous spirits, but they form a cohesive tradition explaining the origin of bomoh. The name of Luqman al-Hakim is often corrupted in the accounts given by the bomohs, but it is unmistakable that the great sage of the Arabian tradition has provided the Malay bomoh with a convenient patron drawn from Islamic traditions.

It is possible that at one time the office of the magician and that of the king or chief were identical in Malay society. The Old Indonesian chief or king was probably elected by common consent and regarded as the keeper of traditions and customs. Only when the institution of the royal court became more developed under Indian influence and the Hindu Brahmin became the chief religious and magical consultant to the king did the office of the bomoh (or pawang) come to be identified with the peasantry. Galestin and Locher have pointed out, taking Java as an example, that while Hindu culture thrived in the royal courts, there were to be found in the villages forms of magic, ceremonial dances and oral literature connected with fertility of the crops or the family, with the cult of the forefathers and of the dead. The same may be said for Malay culture. Once a "Great Tradition" was created, first through Hindu influence and later under Islamic civilisation, in urban royal centres, indigenous traditions which continued to live among the rural masses became the "Little Tradition" of Malay civilisation. It is in the latter "part-culture" that the tradition of Malay bomoh has continued to live on. In the practices of the bomoh, the vestiges of the Bronze Age Indonesian Shamanism are still to be seen. But, as Quaritch Wales has pointed out, shamanistic rituals among

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21 I am using Robert Redfield's concept of "Great" and "Little Traditions" as found in his "The Social Organization of Tradition," in Peasant Society and Culture, Chicago, 1956.
most of the Indonesian groups today, including the Peninsular Malays, have been much influenced by elements of Hinduism and Islam.\textsuperscript{22} The traces of the Old Indonesian shamanism are to be observed mainly in the spirit-raising séances performed by specially qualified bomoh. But, not all the bomohs are credited with the ability to perform a séance or go into a trance.

Hinduism too apparently has left its mark on the office of the Malay bomoh. An incantation claims that “Siva the Teacher, the Light of Muhammad and Luqman al-Hakim were the magicians of old and I (the bomoh) am the fourth magician.” \textsuperscript{23} The implication here is that the office of the pawang has its roots in an impressive array of powerful beings: Siva, the Divine Teacher of the Brahmins; The Light of Muhammad, which is a mystical concept that the soul of the Holy Prophet had pre-existed before his time as the predestined essence of the last prophet; and Luqman al-Hakim. The ideas embodied here can be traced to the sources which have contributed to Malay folk beliefs. Siva, or Batara Guru, as the Hindu god is better known among the Malays, is the Divine Teacher who held an important place in the religious and magical scheme of the Brahmins in the Hindu-Indonesian society of the past.\textsuperscript{24} The magical notions attributed to Batara Guru have their roots in the influence of the Brahmins. The Light of Muhammad is essentially a mystical speculation of the Sufis concerned with the “immaculate pedigree” of the Holy Prophet since Adam.\textsuperscript{25} According to Sufi thought, the light — a dense and luminous point — was the pre-existence of the Prophet himself. But what has come to the Malay folk is the more popular form of the concept diffused by popular tales of Persian provenance, like the \textit{Hikayat Nur Muhammad} (The Tale of the Light of Muhammad). It should be noted that the conceptualisation of the Light of Muhammad arises from the philosophical thoughts of the Sufis inquiring into the relationship of Muhammad as the last and promised Apostle of God to the preceding prophets. But the form that it takes in the Malay folk traditions must have originated from the popular versions couched in terms easily comprehended by the common people or as the result of a filtration of Sufi ideas prevailing

\textsuperscript{22} Prehistory and Religion in South-East Asia (London: Quaritch, 1957), pp. 73-74.
\textsuperscript{23} Winstedt, R. O., \textit{The Malay Magician}, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{25} Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, p. 452.
in the scholarly atmosphere of the royal courts to the common folk or rakyat.\textsuperscript{26}

The antiquity of the office of the bomoh is reflected by the usual reference to the primordial first or original bomoh or pawang ("Pawang Yang Tua" or "Bomoh Yang Asal") who, according to some accounts, predates Siva, Prophet Muhammad, or sometimes even Allah. In a genesis recorded by Skeat, the original pawang precedes Allah at one point while at another both are said to be one and the same.\textsuperscript{27} Winstedt has drawn our attention to the fact that the idea of god being a magician is common in Indonesian and Semitic magic.\textsuperscript{28} One version traces the original bomoh to the children of Adam, while another accounts for the "four original pawang" as the creation of Allah from the four attendants of the figure of Adam (sahabat lembaga Adam).\textsuperscript{29} The identification of Allah with the original bomoh and the use of Islamic notions of creation in the genesis of the bomoh represent some of the attempts to give new interpretations to an old institution. Another example of this fact is to be seen in the association of the first pawang with the berpuar ritual practised in Negeri Sembilan. The berpuar, which is in the form of a mock combat between the forces of good and evil, is an ancient Indonesian ritual connected with rice cultivation still observed by some of the tribal groups in Nusantara. According to the legend of the origin of berpuar and that of the office of pawang, Allah gave Jibrail (Gabriel) "a Book in which could be found effective prescriptions for all ailments and through the medium of certain formulae, miracles could be performed, such for instance, as raising the dead to life, converting grey or white hair to black and making the old regain their youth." \textsuperscript{30}

These accounts represent the esoteric lore of the Malay bomoh and there are many versions of them. However, they usually display the same characteristic, that is a blending of inherited lore with elements from Islamic traditions. This fact represents the interaction on line AB

\textsuperscript{26} As pointed out by George M. Foster, many elements of the folk culture today are derived through time from the culture of the preindustrial urban dwellers which flourished at one time in the past ("What is Folk Culture?" \textit{American Anthropologist}, Vol. 55, No. 21 (1953), pp. 159-173).


\textsuperscript{29} Skeat, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 584-586.

of our triangle. While the institution itself has its roots in the inherited traditions of the culture, it has been drawn through time by the need to conform to a new world-view brought by the teachings of Islam to a point closer to Islamic ideals. Although the resultant form as seen in those accounts given above may not satisfy or meet the ideals of Islamic code, it nevertheless represents a world-view consonant within itself as far as the practitioners and members of the culture are concerned. And this world-view perceives the office of the bomoh as one which is supernatural, or almost, in nature. It is similar to the concept of the semi-divinity of the Malay kings in the past as embodied in the ideas of daulat and tulah. Although it is not so at present, the office of pawang or bomoh at one time had a regalia of its own, just like every Malay sultanate having its regalia, the possession of which is the proof of one’s right to the sacred and highest office in a traditional Malay state. As said above, the interaction on line AB of our triangle is on a supernatural plane or of a supernatural dimension. Any reinterpretation made on the original institution in favour of Islamic ideas as conceived and understood by the people themselves is effected on the same plane, that is on a supernatural plane. This will become clear to us when we consider how one assumes the office of bomoh.

There are two fundamental ways by which one can become a bomoh. The first is to acquire by learning (menuntuÈ) the ilmu from another bomoh and the second is through an extraordinary situation or experience, such as the inheritance of the special quality within a family (baka), a dream, possession of a helper spirit (akuan), chance encounter with a supernatural being or the acquisition of objects which have the quality to cure sickness. Becoming a bomoh does not only mean the acquisition of the ilmu, but also the transference of the teacher’s special endowment (peturun) to the pupil. The pupil then reciprocates with gifts (asam garam) which are more of symbolic rather than of material value. Jeanne Cuisinier has rightly observed that the acquisition of the ilmu is not merely a transference of esoteric knowledge but rather an inheritance from the original bomoh. The esoteric lore of the bomoh is usually not communicated to the uninitiated, but it is not a rare thing to find the knowledge compiled in books usually referred to as Kitab Tib. A 500 page manuscript I recently purchased from Pak Nik

Abdul Rahman, the royal bomoh of Kelantan, contains 147 fasal (subjects) dealing with the cure for all kinds of illnesses known to the Malays. But, it is not the knowledge that is of significance to the practice of the bomoh, it is the mystical almost sacred qualities that one must infuse oneself with, or one must acquire for oneself, that will ultimately influence one’s assumption of the office, and, later, efficacy as a bomoh. There are many special prescriptions and proscriptions to be observed by a bomoh, not only during his period of apprenticeship but also after becoming a full-fledged specialist. He may have to avoid certain type of food, perform certain special tasks or behave in a certain manner, all of which would indicate his distinction from the ordinary people.

It is because of the cultural world-view which lays more emphasis on the extraordinary qualities of the bomoh, especially those which create an aura of almost supernatural character around the person of the bomoh, that the second method of becoming a bomoh assumes its significance. The special qualities or powers are acquired either directly, in which case it is usually an encounter with a spirit or a revered figure in the attire usually conceived as that of a Muslim pious man, or indirectly, which is through certain signs (alamat). A well-known bomoh, who in everyday life was a high-ranking army officer, acquired his special qualities not through learning but primarily through spiritual agents. In the dreams, extraordinary experiences and an encounter with Prophet Khidir. The most common experience, however, is to be informed by a spiritual being, usually a wali (sage), in a dream that one is to become a bomoh. Usually, someone who is going to be blessed by such a dream would receive the signs for some period before the actual dream comes. It is also possible for someone to obtain objects with miraculous powers to be used for curing sicknesses after being told about them in a dream. From the accounts collected among those bomohs who had acquired office through the second method, there is a definite leaning towards giving the extraordinary experiences they had an Islamic bias. The robed figure who appears so often in the dreams of would-be bomohs would invariably be Nabi Khidir, Luqman al-Hakim or a wali who is known as a keramat in the locality. Even if the identity is not clear, prefixes of Muslim connotation are given, such as “Sheikh”, “Sayed” or “Habib”. However, there are also

references to visitations by a *penunggu* (guardian spirit) of a place, common *hantu* (spirit) or souls of dead persons, but it is also quite often to find these indigenous spiritual beings attired in flowing robes, huge turbans and sweeping grey beard, the way a *wali Allah* is often pictured in traditional Malay literature, especially in classical Malay works and oral tales. Here again we are confronted with further evidence of the integration of diverse traditions in Malay culture.

It is also interesting to note that the *bomoh* is often distinguished from a class of miracle-workers known in Malay culture as "*keramat hidup*", which can be loosely translated as "living saints". While *bomoh* is ubiquitous in Malay society, "*keramat hidup*" is a rare phenomenon. There are two types of "*keramat hidup*": the pious ascetics who themselves do not claim of having miraculous powers and those miracle-workers who claim that they have been chosen by a known *keramat* to act as an intermediary.\(^{34}\) A distinguishing mark of a self-proclaimed "*keramat hidup*" is his yellow robe. In fact, everything around him is decorated in yellow, a colour representing sacredness in Malay symbolism. The "*keramat hidup*" is of popular Islamic derivation in Malay culture and is a comparatively recent introduction. Thus he differs, in the conception of the Malays, from the *bomoh*, which is an indigenous institution, even if it has accrued many Islamic elements and identification by now. Equally interesting to note is the fact that while *bomohs* enjoy comparative freedom from the sanctions of the religious authorities, the same cannot be said for "*keramat hidup*". As soon as it is known that someone is attracting a good following as a "*keramat hidup*", the officials from the Religious Affairs Department are not slow in investigating the case. More often than not, after such a visit, the "miracles" of the "*keramat hidup*" would fizzle out and he would be chastised and made to return to the true path of Islam. Thus, although diverse traditions can intermingle in a coherent order in Malay culture, they can also be distinguished from one another in certain instances as we have seen in the case of *bomoh* and "*keramat hidup*".

What I have tried to show is that the institution of *bomoh* is fundamentally based on supernatural premises. The patterns of these premises are circumscribed by the indigenous traditional order of the supernatural world on the one hand and the Islamic ideals on the other. The patterns can also be conceived as the results of interaction on

\(^{34}\) For a discussion on *keramat hidup*, see my work, "Indigenous, Hindu and Islamic Elements in Malay Folk Beliefs," as cited above.
line AB of our triangle. Historically speaking, the interaction has been
taking place for centuries, that is since the Islamisation of the Malay
culture. The actual resultant forms arising from the process differ and
vary from situation to situation, depending on the exact nature of the
factors prevailing, but what we can show are just the patterns that can
emerge from the whole process. Bearing in mind that the bomoh had
been for centuries the only social institution connected with the healing
of the sick, its importance does not lie only in the function it performs
in everyday life, but also in its influence on the world-view of the Malay
culture with regard to the causation, nature and cure of sicknesses: We
have seen that right from the beginning the institution of bomoh had
been suffused with supernatural notions. It was not unlike the idea
of semi-divine kingship in the traditional Malay political system. With
the coming of Islam these supernatural notions had undergone some
changes with the inclusion of elements from the Muslim civilisation.
But what has remained unchanged is the underlying supernatural
dimension of the institution. In other words, whatever modification
Islam has effected on the institution of bomoh, it has been done mainly
on the supernatural plane. That is the reason why, I think, the in-
stitution has not gone underground or disappeared with the ascendancy
of Islam in Malay culture. On the contrary, Islamic ideas have helped
to give new meaning to the institution of bomoh. And this is made
possible because the admixture of diverse traditions of the institution
is quite capable of being coherently organised within the framework
of the world-view of Malay culture. Conflicts will surely arise if the
society chose to apply strictly the sanctions of Islamic ideals, but this
has been rare and far between in the history of Malay society and
culture.

The introduction of Western medicine and concept of sickness has
brought about a different kind of interaction. While the institution of
bomoh is basically based on supernatural premises, that of the modern
medical practitioner is based on empirical research and knowledge. The
two thus meet on different planes or in different dimensions. As such
the problem of the acceptance of modern medicine in Malay society,
especially rural society, is viewed as arising from a competition between
different premises regarding the causation, nature and cause of diseases.
Joseph Wolff has noted that the problem is not one of rejection, for
the rural Malays do know about modern medicine, but rather one of
rearranging the world-view of Malay culture so that modern medicine
will form an integral part of it and not something simply hooked on
to it. We have noted that cultural change brought about by Islam has not changed fundamentally the premises which underlie the institution of bomoh; thus the Malay world-view regarding diseases and their cure did not have to undergo drastic reorientations. But the same cannot be said for the confrontation between traditional and modern medical concepts in Malay culture. The Islamisation of Malay culture since five hundred years ago has seen the retention of the same institution for solving the problems of health and illness. But with the acceptance of modern medicine, there exist two distinguishable institutions which serve as alternatives for tackling the same problem. Thus it is "ikhtiar" (resourcefulness) for a western educated Malay, who under normal circumstances would only rely on modern medical skills, to consult the bomoh when the situation seems hopeless. Similarly, a Malay who is still reluctant to trust other than the bomoh will accept modern medical treatment if the situation demands it, although sometimes it is too late to be of any good. To the modern medical practitioner charged with administering western medicine to rural Malay folk, the response can be quite frustrating, but the phenomenon is explicable in terms of traditional Malay world-view regarding medicine.

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