

Lipi Report

Changing Perceptions of Traditional Healing and Modern Medicine in the Bajo Society: a Socio-cultural Study

Introduction

Before my study this summer, there has been limited research into the medical beliefs of the Bajo societies of South-East Asia. Nimmo (1990) gave detailed descriptions of many of the religious rituals of the Tawi-Tawi Bajo and Sather (1997) touched briefly on the subject of increasing respect for modern medical systems in reference to natal problems. Yet, the study of ideas on causation of illness and factors influencing the choice of medical systems in the Bajo communities seems to have been neglected.

Through studying the traditional beliefs of the Bajo community linked to health and illness I hope to develop an understanding of their causation and hence the diagnosis and treatment techniques of the shamans, 'sanro' in Sampela. In association I hope to learn the thoughts and knowledge of modern medical practises from the perspective of the Bajo community. Combining this research with the Bajo's social feelings and pragmatic considerations I hope to complete a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing their choice of medical systems. This will hopefully initiate a deeper understanding of the role of traditional healing and modern medicine in the Bajo society which can lead to future developments of health care.

Aims

1. To understand perceptions of health and causation of illness in the Bajo community.
2. To understand the Bajo communities' knowledge of modern medicine.
3. To study the contribution of cultural beliefs, social feelings and pragmatic considerations in the choice of medical practitioner by members of the Bajo community.

Method

Primarily I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with 14 sanro, 3 Imam and a 2 Kaledupan nurses all working as medical practitioners in the Bajo community of Sampela. The topics covered included personal details, common illnesses, practises used, techniques of diagnosis, thoughts on other practitioners and networks of assistance and referrals.

I followed this with 72 interviews covering many ages and areas (therefore wealth and beliefs) throughout Sampela. These structured interviews questioned them about their last illness; the cause, treatment, symptoms and medical practitioner. In addition it asked them why they chose this practitioner and who they would go to next time.

I conducted: 2 health focus groups with groups of 5 discussing definitions of illness, causation, prevention and initial treatment, 2 'doctor' focus groups with groups of 5 discussing their thoughts on doctors, nurses and modern medical practises.

I spoke to 6 of the most popular sanro about the detailed causation and treatment of illness in reference to sea spirits, God and black magic.

In conclusion I did 4 focus groups, 2 in the most traditional area and 2 in the most muslim area discussing more detailed beliefs in causation, the degree to which each of these were causing illness in Sampela, which factors affected which practitioners they were visiting and what defines a 'famous' sanro.

During my 5 weeks in Sampela, I also used observation, keeping a field diary which would contribute to a triangulation form of analysis.

Results and Initial Analysis

The beliefs in health and illness within Sampela are still primarily traditional. Illness and its seriousness are defined through the degree it decreases their ability to continue every day activities; walking, eating, work and socialising in the extreme degree. Causation is linked to ideas of God, black magic, sea, land and ancestor spirits. The manner in which people believe they work together varies, some believe that the spirits are assistants to God whilst others see them as a complete separate entity yet, even the most muslim people in Sampela believe in them to some degree apart from a very small minority. It is thought that these sea spirits, the main subjects being the octopus and crocodile, cause illness due to generic beliefs in the sea and reef being damaged. Another type of sea spirit, the Bajo's placenta sister/brother will cause illness if they are forgotten. The ancestor spirits are seen by some to be sea spirits and some believe they combine to form the king of sea spirits 'Mbojango'. Yet, in whichever way people believe in ancestor spirits the reason for which they cause illness seems constant; if you forget your ancestors or do not respect them then they will give you illness. The land spirits are a less important feature in the everyday life of the Bajo as they only cause illness to people who have been on the land (or in the mangroves). The community of Sampela is split as to people who believe that God can cause illness in his own right and those that believe he only causes illness through his assistant spirits. I think this may be a positive factor affecting whether they believe modern medicine can cure illness as only the sanros have the knowledge to make the spirits go away but modern medicine can cure illness caused by God. Black magic also has a strong position in beliefs of causation; members of the community are known to visit sanro to cause illness in those they are jealous of through bad mantra.

Simple ideas of modern medical causation appeared to be understood by the Bajo and were expressed as additional reasons for illness through 'fatigue, bad food and too much sun'. These show a strong link between the type of illness and the increased openness to the possibility of visiting a modern medical practitioner.

The Bajo perceptions of modern medical systems are very basic. They know who the doctors and nurses are, the education they have and the way they behave, the

place they work and the equipment they use. This, however, comes to no consequence as they have little to no understanding of the way their treatment works and have such strong beliefs in spirits and black magic which they have no conceivable way of explaining that anyone other than the sanros can treat. The main reason people gave me for not visiting the doctor was that they are expensive, yet when I found out the comparative expense people are spending on doctors and sanros this does not seem to correlate. It appears the difference comes in the fact that they have no choice in whether they pay the doctors or nurses as opposed to the sanro who do not ask for payment, it is just offered. They believe sanros help them from their heart but the doctors just want to make money.

The factors affecting whether the community of Sampela visit a modern medical practitioner or traditional healer seem to be strongly linked to their understanding of causation. The beliefs and knowledge of sanro is the most important factors affecting which sanro they visit and these contribute to which sanro are considered famous. The cost of doctors prevent them Bajo visiting them yet they express that it does not matter how much the sanro cost as this does not influence who they visit. They also say that their relationship; family or friendship does no affect who they visit yet, in my structured interviews with the community these themes have often emerged. The distance of the sanro from them in Sampela does not matter but if doctors or sanros live outside Sampela they explain this as a reason not to visit them.

The networks of reasons for visiting specific traditional healers or modern medical practitioners appear complex and their expressed motives I believe are different to their actions in reality. This will be studied at a greater depth within my dissertation.