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CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF JAKUN



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In Malaysia, indigenous people are divided into three large ethnic groups, namely Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay, and each of these large groups contains several sub-groups (JAKOA, 2025; Sa'at et al., 2013). The indigenous Jakun people are a sub-group of Proto-Malay, and the second largest group of indigenous people; they live in the south of Peninsular Malaysia, notably in south Pahang and Johor states (Yap et al., 2025). Linguistic and archaeological evidence suggests that the first Proto-Malay immigrants came from Taiwan around 4000 to 3000 BC (Andaya, 2001). The Jakun are also believed

to have a lineage linked with Yunan in Southern China, with evidence suggesting that descendants began to migrate around 5,000 years ago (Yap et al., 2025). At that time, the indigenous Jakun communities were nicknamed “Batang Air” (literally translated as “Water Trunk”) because of their settlements’ proximity to rivers and creeks (Sa’at et al., 2013). To this day, these locations are still chosen

the production of a variety of items derived from forest materials, such as handicrafts (Mohd Sam & Wee, 2014).

The indigenous Jakun communities in Kampung Peta, in the district of Mersing, Johor, can be viewed through two cultural lenses. The first is material cultures, which focuses on using physical cultural tools as traditional products. The

To this day, these locations are still chosen because the river and indigenous Jakun communities cannot be separated; indeed, the river has been a place where they have earned their livelihood for millennia.

because the river and indigenous Jakun communities cannot be separated; indeed, the river has been a place where they have earned their livelihood for millennia (Maeda, 2001; Kasim, 2019). In addition, the river also offers a route for them to go from one village to another using boats or canoes (Maeda, 2001; Kasim, 2019). One example is the indigenous Jakun communities in the district of Mersing, Johor. Mersing is located on the Endau River and joins with the Sembrong river; further along, it also connects with the Kahang, Kluang, Selai, and Bekok rivers (Maeda, 2001; Kasim, 2019).

In general, the indigenous communities who reside in the tropical rainforests of Peninsular Malaysia have their own identity and culture; even the knowledge they have is inherited and learned from previous heirs of their tribe (Mohd Sam & Wee, 2014). Their natural relationship with the wilderness has led to the

The second is non-material cultures, such as aspects of traditional medicine and beliefs that indigenous communities have practised for millennia (Mohd Sam & Wee, 2014). Thus, the Jakun people have a rich cultural and spiritual life that is worthy of further exploration.

Customs, beliefs and taboos

Indigenous Jakun communities still practise animism, although some communities have embraced other religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism (Sa’at et al., 2013). This belief in animism is deeply connected with the communities’ intricate relationship with the environment and natural spirits such as mountains and rivers (Masron et al., 2013). In addition, they believe that the spirits of ancestors and guardians of the forest exist. Therefore, they try their best to guard their behaviours and practices so that the spirits of ancestors and the forest will not disturb them (Kasim, 2019). For example, while in the forest,

they are forbidden to cut down big trees or to talk in an arrogant manner because if they do, something bad could happen to them. For example, they could get lost in the forest or be harassed by “jin” (literally translated as “spirits” – Kasim, 2019). Not only that, in the event of any violation of rules or taboos, their village could suffer misfortune (Masron et al., 2013).

individuals, who are considered “berdarah manis” (literally translated as “sweet-blooded”), are not allowed to go into the forest, or be near sea cliffs, or rivers; they are not even encouraged to ride motorcycles to avoid accidents. Meanwhile, newly engaged women are traditionally kept indoors for a week (Suhaimi et al., 2022). The custom after marriage involves the exchange of knives

In marriage, the Jakun people also adhere to the custom of “merisik” (which can be understood as a “marriage inquiry”), which involves proposing and getting married.

Suhaimi et al. (2022) identify seven taboos shared by indigenous Jakun communities in Kampung Sentosa Lenga, in the district of Muar, Johor. Pregnant women are prohibited from eating certain foods, such as pineapple and seafood (such as squid, sardines and stingrays), as they can cause stomach pain, which can subsequently lead to miscarriage. After giving birth, new mothers must avoid foods that are considered poisonous, such as Indian mackerel, which is believed to cause stitches to itch. In relation to death customs, indigenous people who have recently lost a family member are prohibited from leaving their house for a week, and even a widow is prohibited from wearing makeup (Suhaimi et al., 2022).

In marriage, the Jakun people also adhere to the custom of “merisik” (which can be understood as a “marriage inquiry”), which involves proposing and getting married (Suhaimi et al., 2022). Engaged

knives and spears, which is symbolic of the agreement between the families, while if there is a “mati adat” (refer to divorce), the man has to pay substantial compensation as determined by “Tok Batin” (the head of the village) (Suhaimi et al., 2022).

With regards to taboos in traditional medicine, patients cannot eat chillies during the medicinal period – that is, the entire duration they are undergoing traditional healing – until they are completely cured and this is confirmed by the healer or shaman (Suhaimi et al., 2022). This is because they believe that chilli has spicy properties that can cause pain in the heart, thus disrupting the medical process. The violation of this taboo may in turn negatively impact future treatments. For female patients, the healer uses tepus leaves (*Etlingera elatior*). These leaves have the special ability to treat female patients as well as protect the customs and laws of different

genders (Suhaimi et al., 2022). Tepus leaves are traditionally applied in post-partum care to reduce swelling and aid recovery, highlighting their significance in women's health practices (Yunus et al., 2021).

Because the main occupation of the indigenous Jakun communities revolves around forest products, they are prohibited from mentioning bad things that can bring about disaster when going into the forest. For example, the names of wild animals such as tigers and snakes cannot be mentioned directly because the naming process has the potential to beckon these animals and thus put people in danger. If necessary, they use other indicators such as metaphors to refer to the animals (Suhaimi et al., 2022). This taboo is also practised among other communities, such as the indigenous Iban communities, who use euphemisms to mention the names of animals and supernatural beings to avoid danger (Daud et al., 2017; Suhaimi et al., 2022). Therefore, this taboo continues to be practised to show respect for nature,

patrilineally, passed down from father to son or grandson, following customary laws that align with formal legislation (Ali et al., 2019). This hereditary succession reflects the Tok Batin's critical role in managing community rules, safeguarding traditions, and overseeing the social and cultural life of the Jakun people (Ali et al., 2019).

Language use and conversation

Indigenous Jakun communities use the Jakun language in their daily lives, although this language does not have a formal written system (Awang Tan et al., 2024). The Jakun language is spoken from childhood through to adulthood, ensuring it is passed orally from generation to generation, maintaining its role as a key pillar of Jakun identity (Awang Tan et al., 2024).

Furthermore, in terms of language, Jakun communities use a spoken language that is part of the Austronesian language group (Melayo-Polynesian). Languages in this group bear many similarities to and slight differences from the Malay language (Carey, 1976; Awang Tan et al., 2024).

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which is an important element in the lives of the indigenous Jakun communities. In terms of hierarchies, Jakun communities are led by the village head: Tok Batin. Tok Batin holds the highest position in the indigenous communities; this position is typically inherited

Based on Kasim's (2019) study, there are two indigenous Jakun dialects in the state of Johor. The relationship between these two indigenous Jakun dialects and the Malay (the largest ethnic group in Malaysia) language is at the language family level. The Jakun language is also

one of the branches of the parent language—the ancient Malay language rather than the borrowed Malay language. Jakun communities use the suffix /k/ and prefix /h/ in many words, whose pronunciation is very similar to that used in Malay phonology (Logan, 1847; Kasim, 2023). The location of the settlement also affects the speaking style and dialect used (Zakaria et al., 2022; Awang Tan et al., 2024). Not only that, but the dialects of Jakun communities such as Kampung Permatang Keledang, in the district of Pekan, Pahang, and Kampung Mentelong, in the district of Rompin, Pahang, are different. This indirectly shows that the location of the settlement also affects the way the community speaks (Awang Tan et al., 2024).

The proof is that the indigenous Jakun communities who live in Kampung Permatang Keledang which is located near the coast, often use personal pronouns such as “kam” and “hema” (translated as “me”) and “ajih” (translated as “you”), while the Jakun people who live in Kampung Mentelong (a rural area) usually use “kok”

their environment, traditions, and linguistic identity. Their customs, beliefs, and taboos reflect a deep respect for nature, as evidenced in their spiritual practices and oral traditions. The Jakun's reliance on the forest for their livelihoods, from traditional medicine to handicrafts, highlights their sustainable way of life. Language plays a vital role in maintaining their cultural identity, with distinct dialects influenced by geographical location. Despite outside influences, the Jakun people continue to uphold their ancestral traditions, ensuring the survival of their unique heritage for future generations.

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and “ang” (translated as “me”) and “kau” and “hik” (translated as “you”) (Awang Tan et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The cultural heritage of the Jakun indigenous people is closely linked to their

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