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## Traditional Knowledge on the Universe among the Semaq Beri Tribe in Terengganu State, Peninsular Malaysia

<sup>1</sup>Ramle Abdullah, <sup>2</sup>Nur Hafizah Ramle, <sup>3</sup>Mohd Sukhairi Mat Rasat

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Bachok Campus, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Earth Science, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Jeli Campus, 17600 Jeli, Kelantan, Malaysia.

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Each society has its own distinctive perceptions and knowledge on the Universe, especially towards the world that has become their place of residence; such is the case of the Orang Asli, one of the indigenous communities in Malaysia. Among the Orang Asli from the Semaq Beri tribe in Terengganu State there exist a narratives or myth that describes their knowledge on such beliefs. **Objective:** A study by means of fieldwork was carried out towards the Semaq Beri tribe in the Kemaman district, Terengganu to obtain detailed information regarding such elements. The objectives of the study are to explore and clarify on their knowledge on natural events, the structure of the world that is home to humans and its relation to other natural elements. Data were collected using interview techniques on a number of key informants, as well as participation observation. **Results:** The results showed that the Semaq Beri tribe possesses a knowledge structure that is concrete towards the origin of nature's existence and its structure. The basic form of nature in the thoughts of the Semaq Beri covers the world, the sun, moon and stars. The world is the key environmental element which possesses seven layers. **Conclusion:** The structural pattern of the world as presented has its own distinctive rationale and is closely related to the overall belief aspects of the Semaq Beri tribe.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Semaq Beri is one of the Orang Asli tribes found in Terengganu State, Malaysia. Besides the Semaq Beri, this state is also home to another Orang Asli tribe known as the Batek. However the Semaq Beri is the largest Orang Asli tribe in Terengganu with the current figure at 951 persons or 96.2% from the total Orang Asli population in Terengganu (JAKOA, 2011). The tribe resides in two villages, namely Kampung Sungai Pergam in Kemaman and Kampung Sungai Berua in Hulu Terengganu. The overall distribution for each village is as follows in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Semaq Beri residents in Terengganu state.

| Village       | Ethnic (tribe) | Number of Families | RESIDENTS |        |       |
|---------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------|--------|-------|
|               |                |                    | Male      | Female | Total |
| Sungai Berua  | Semaq Beri     | 88                 | 213       | 203    | 416   |
| Sungai Pergam | Semaq Beri     | 114                | 294       | 241    | 535   |
| Total         |                | 202                | 507       | 444    | 951   |

Source: JAKOA (2011)

The lifestyles of the Semaq Beri tribe in Terengganu State are similar to most of the other Orang Asli tribes in Malaysia. Traditionally, their lives are directly related to the forests which form the backdrop of their settlement surroundings (Lye, 2002; Hood, 1993). The forests form the basis for economic activities in obtaining sustenance, livelihood as well as other daily necessities. The experiences in relation to forests and the natural environment also influences the other cultural elements practiced, ranging from belief systems, ways of thinking, customs, taboos, rituals, arts, etc. In terms of beliefs, such is the belief that the world was created by the supernatural powers as a place of residence for humans as well as other living beings. The forest itself is a

**Corresponding Author:** Ramle Abdullah Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia.  
Tel: +6019-9345586  
E-mail: ramle@unisza@yahoo.com

form of life bestowed by the supernatural powers for the benefit of mankind. Therefore, the exploitation of forest products must be carried out with great respects and adhere to certain taboos.

### ***Various Perspectives on the Origin of the Universe:***

A fact that must be accepted by each individual is the existence of the relationship between humans and the natural world as a whole. Thus, among the focus of knowledge that develops in each group of human race is the science that explains upon the origin of the Universe, the occurrence of natural phenomenon, the impact of nature and the process of adaptation of humans with the natural environment of their respective settlement surroundings. History depicts on how humans, ever since the dawn of civilization, have strived towards providing explanations regarding the Universe, particularly on the origin of creation. Without scientific-based facts, humans during this period of time have tried to explain on natural phenomenon based upon experiences in their relationships with nature itself. The explanation given is either in the form of certain schools of thought, folklore or even societal myths.

During the ancient Greek civilization, there seemed to exist ideas that tried to explain on the origin of the Universe. A number of ancient Greek philosophers renowned as adherents to materialism (Nur Fauzan, 2012) explained on how the Universe naturally came into being by itself, without a creator. The formation of the world occurred due to the atomic merging process of an element, where some believed this element as being water, while others stating it as being air and fire. Apart from that, there were also philosophers especially adherents to idealism stating that the world was indeed a creation of the Creator, and did not simply exist on its own.

In addition, mythological tales from various races narrates similar stories. In Chinese societies for example there are a number of myths that tries to explain on the origin of the Universe. Among others, there are myths that suggest the world was originally shaped like an egg (Ho, 2013). Contained within the egg was a mixture of various elements in ambiguous form. A character by the name of Pan-gu had split the egg shell open, and this resulted in the upper shell transforming into a sky while the lower shell transformed into the Earth. The various mixtures contained within the egg later became air, clouds and soil. Such myths are also found among many indigenous communities. In Malaysia, mythological tales in similar form can be found either among the indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak such as the Iban, as well as Orang Asli tribes from the Peninsular such as the Che Wong (Howell, 1984), Batek (Endicott, 1979) and Ma'Betise' (Karim, 1981). The essence of these myth tales asserts the roles of supernatural powers in the initial process of the formation and subsequent development of the Universe.

The process of Universe creation is also described by various religions. In Hinduism, the Universe was created by the powers of Brahman (Nur Fauzan, 2012). While in Islam it clearly states that the Universe and its circulation was created by Allah the Almighty. The Koran mentions on how Allah created the Universe in a period of six days. The relevant Koranic verses are translated as follows:

*'And He it is Who has created the heavens and the earth in six Days and His Throne was on the water, that He might try you, which of you is the best in deeds. But if you were to say to them: You shall indeed be raised up after death,' those who disbelieve would be sure to say, this is nothing but obvious magic'.*

(Koran, Sura Hud: 7)

*'Who created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six days? Then He Istawa (rose over) the Throne (in a manner that suits His Majesty). The Most Beneficent (Allah)! Ask Him (O Prophet Muhammad pbuh), (concerning His Qualities, His rising over His Throne, His creations, etc.), as He is Al-Khabir (The All-Knower of everything i.e. Allah)'.*

(Koran, Sura al-Furqan: 59)

The various perspectives that discusses on the creation of the Universe clearly implies the notions that the Universe existed on its own. However, the majority revealed the involvement of certain divine powers in the process, which includes depictions from mythological narrations belonging to various groups of people. The question here is what are the understandings and knowledge of the Semaq Beri tribe in relation to this matter? Relevant explanations will be furthermore presented in this article.

### ***Objectives:***

As previously stated, the experiences of a tribe in relation to nature have shaped the mode of thinking of community members. Among indigenous societies this mode of thinking is manifested through various elements of culture including mythological tales included in the belief systems practiced. Thus, this article will provide explanations regarding the thoughts and knowledge of the Semaq Beri tribe towards the environment which is an element in their belief systems. Focus is given on explanations related to their perceptions towards the creation of the Universe, its structure and the world that is the place for human habitation.

### Literature Review:

The Orang Asli community, being one of the ethnic groups in Malaysia has received the attention of many researchers since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many studies have been carried out by Western academicians, including British colonial officers with aims to truly understand the unique and untouched culture of Orang Asli communities. A handful of notable researchers during this era were Skeat and Blagden (1906), Evans (1915; 1920), Williams-Hunt (1952) and Slimming (1958). Their findings have generally highlighted on the ethnographic aspects of Orang Asli communities being an ethnic group residing in remote areas throughout Peninsular Malaysia.

Subsequently, after the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, starting in the 1960s until the end of the century was the period for researchers like Dentan (1968), Benjamin (1967; 1968; 1976), Baharon (1973), Schebesta (1973), Rambo (1979), Needham (1974), Endicott (1974; 1979), Dunn (1975), Carey (1968; 1976), Karim (1977), Hood (1978), Howell (1982; 1983), Gomes (1986), Kuchikura (1988), Juli (1988; 1993), Ramle (1988; 1993), Hassan (1997; 1998), Nicholas (1990) and Lim (1997) who had studied and written in depth and detail on any one aspect of Orang Asli ethnography. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, a number of researchers as mentioned above as well as the emergence of new ones continued to contribute on their research and write-ups in similar form. Among others were Ramle (2001), Ramle and Hood (2010), Ramle and Abdul Razaq (2012), Ramle *et al.* (2013), Nicholas (2006), Lye (2000; 2002), Gomes (2004), Zainal Abidin (2004; 2008; 2012), Kazuhiro (2008), Nurul Fatanah (2009), Juli (2012), Asmawi (2013) and many others.

Almost all aspects of Orang Asli ethnography had been explored by various researchers with each one having their own study focus. Among the aspects that continue to fascinate most researchers are subjects on the belief systems as well as on traditional knowledge. Among the notable researchers that have contributed their studies in these aspects are Schebesta (1973), Karim (1977), Hood (1978), Endicott (1979), Howell (1982; 1983), Juli (1988), Ramle (1988), Nurul Fatanah (2009) and Asmawi (2013). Besides these, other topics of interest for research are the aspects highlighting on the economy, development and education of Orang Asli which had involved studies from Endicott (1974), Dunn (1975), Rambo (1979), Gomes (1986), Kuchikura (1988), Lye Tuck-Po (2000, 2002), Hasan Mat Nor (1997), Mustaffa Omar *at.al* (2012), Zainal Abidin Hj.Ali (2004, 2012), Ramle (2012), Nicholas (2006) and Lim (1997).

The belief aspects have been discussed by researchers either by the approach of discussing on the belief system of a tribe as a whole or the approach of giving focus to certain elements within a belief system of certain selected tribes. Endicott (1979) for example had been discussing extensively on the belief systems of the Batek tribe, ranging from the concept of human elements from the Batek perspective, the deities they worship, taboos, rituals, cosmology and the afterlife. In regards to the supreme powers, the Batek are said to believe in various deities acting as supernatural powers. Among the main supernatural powers are the ones known as *Gobal*, *Ya'* and *Karei*. The Batek believe that these supernatural powers are responsible in determining the form of social order as guidelines to the relationship patterns between humans with humans, plants, animals and other natural elements. Practices towards such a social order in the lives of the Batek are known as *lawac* (taboos). Violation of the *lawac* will only arouse the wrath of the supernatural powers and eventually result in human punishment either in the form of rainstorms, lightning or floods.

The belief elements as discussed by Endicott (1979) had also been presented by Karim (1977). In discussing the Orang Asli belief systems of the Ma'Betise' tribe, he explains on the tribe's ideology in the context of their relationships with the natural environment. Karim furthermore explains that the exploration and exploitation of forest products, which is a gift from the supernatural powers, the Ma'Betise' possesses their own methods and taboos. If the taboos are violated, tribe members will receive punishment either in the form of *kemali'* (customary dominance of animals and nature on humans) or *tulah* (customary dominance of humans on animals and nature) which results in them being struck with sickness, disasters which may lead to deaths.

A similar approach to Karim (1977) was also contributed by Hood (1978). In his study on the Semelai tribe, Hood Salleh discussed on the beliefs and knowledge of the tribe in terms of medicine and healing practices. Among others the Semelai believe that all elements ranging from plants, animals, soil, rocks, etc. possesses their own spirit. Therefore, if these elements must be taken by humans for other specific purposes such as used in medicine, it is necessary to seek permission from the relevant spirit to ensure its efficacy. In addition to such writings, until now there have also been researchers writing on Orang Asli belief systems from the cosmological standpoint. Among others Schebesta (1973) was an early writer discussing on the thoughts and knowledge of the Orang Asli on this matter. In a study on the Jahai tribe, he stated that the Jahai believe that the world was initially created by a supernatural power called *Tak Pen*. Subsequently, writing on the cosmological thoughts and knowledge of the Orang Asli towards the Universe was also carried out by Endicott (1979), which was an element in his discussions on the belief systems of the Batek. The impressions given by Endicott have many similarities with what was narrated by Schebesta. According to him, the Batek believe the world was created by the supernatural powers through a process involving the role of a mythical bird. The Universe has many layers, with one of these layers being the Earth which humans inhabit.

Howell's writing (1982) on the cosmologies of the Chewong tribe also shows a description very similar to Schebesta and Endicott, especially from the point of origin of existence and the creation of the Universe. Mythologies of the Chewong show that they believe the world was created by the supernatural powers in layered structures. Apart from the world that is home to human life, there also exists another world for the after life. It is believed that this realm exists somewhere in the west of today's world, and has properties that are better than the existing world. Examination on past writings related to the creation of the Universe in the context of the views of such indigenous tribes did not only reveal their thought frames towards such elements, but also indicated it as an essential element in the belief systems practiced. As continuity to the writings by previous researchers, this article will highlight on the thoughts and knowledge of the Semaq Beri tribe in this context based on the objectives specified.

### Methodology:

Information for this article was obtained through the continuous fieldworks carried out beginning in 1986 in two (2) Semaq Beri villages in Terengganu State, namely Kampung Sungai Pergam in Kemaman district and Kampung Sungai Berua in Hulu Terengganu district. Three (3) specific periods of fieldworks were carried out: (i) the fieldwork carried out from 1986 to 1988, (ii) fieldwork period from 1997 to 2001, and (iii) fieldwork period from 2006 till 2007. Through these fieldworks the techniques of observation, interviews and document study were used to gather all relevant ethnographical data.

Observation techniques used to witness the practices of local residents towards religious activities particularly the rituals held such as healing and medicinal rituals. Through this technique the researcher could understand the tribal concepts of world-views which are home to humans as well as other natural elements. Interview techniques were carried out with aims of obtaining specific explanations on the dimensions which are the study objectives specified. A number of residents which were religious leaders and village elders were made as key informants in this context. The interview process were carried out informally during participation in such rituals held as well as when an opportunity to be with the key informant arised. The interview processes were carried out in stages, namely general interviews, specific interviews and focused interviews.

In addition relevant secondary data were obtained through the examination of various documents such as earlier research, artefacts owned by local residents as well as other reading materials. This form of information was vital as reference and backup to the findings obtained through the fieldwork. In summary, this article is based on two information sources, namely primary and secondary sources. The coupling pattern of both relevant data sources in producing the study findings are as shown in the following diagram in Figure 1.

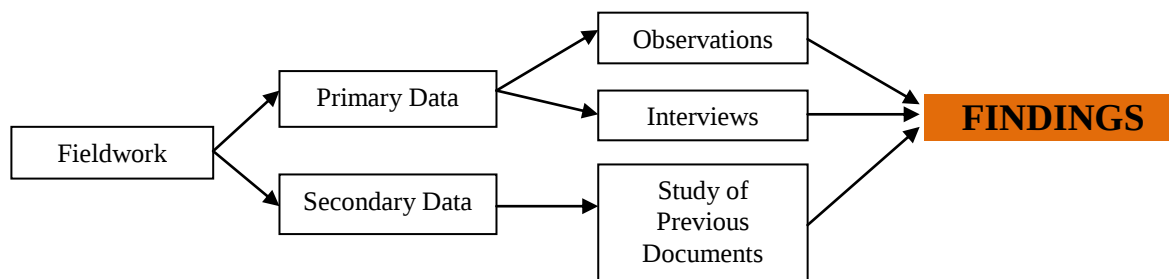


Fig. 1: Structure of data collection.

Data collected from the various techniques were analysed in order to achieve the study objectives. The analysis processes were based on the following procedures; (i) review and purification of data, (ii) organise data based on the themes determined, and (iii) data coding.

### Findings:

#### a) Basis of Belief:

The Semaq Beri possesses a form of belief and world view that is evident in everyday behavior or social norms. They believe that human life is controlled by the supernatural powers, consisting of unearthly beings with specific names such as *Tohan*, *Karei*, *Adam* and *Hawa*. The mountains and forests are the places of residence or 'homes' for these supernatural powers.

The supernatural powers are regarded as creators of the Universe, including the Earth and all elements contained in it such as mountains, hills, forests, lakes and rivers. In the context of relationships with humans, the supernatural powers are believed to provide sustenance, care for the welfare, and control behaviour through the certain rules set and to punish humans that violate these rules.

Apart from the supernatural powers the Semaq Beri tribe also believes in the existence of superhuman beings. In general a superhuman being refers to two subjects. First, referring to the deceased ancestral spirits known as *ruwai*. Second, referring to certain living humans with mystical qualities especially in the context of

relationships with the supernatural powers. These superhuman beings are also given certain titles such as *semaq hala'* (*hala'* humans) and *pawang* (shaman).

Superhuman beings are believed to have a number of important roles. Among others; (i) responsible to the supernatural powers towards looking-out to humans, plants, animals and all life forms on Earth, (ii) as mediator between humans and the supernatural powers. These superhuman beings are where ordinary humans seek wishes and assistance such as the healing of sickness, be spared from disasters, seek forgiveness for any wrongdoings and sins as well as to obtain sustenance. All these wishes and assistance sought by humans will be sent to the supernatural powers.

The Semaq Beri also has its own distinctive view towards the whereabouts of the Universe and the world they live in. This is clearly evident when detailed on their beliefs towards the formation process of the world, its structure as well as other elements of nature.

#### **b) Knowledge on the Universe:**

The concept of the Universe according to the Semaq Beri covers the Earth and other cosmological elements such as the sun, moon and stars. The notion on the Universe and its formation process is an aspect closely linked to their faith. The Semaq Beri tribe believes that all natural elements such as the Earth, sun, moon and stars did not exist by itself and instead underwent certain processes in its formation. It is also believed that the Universe has a structure or section that is well-organised, with each section having its own distinctive function.

##### **i) Formation of the Earth:**

There exists a myth which explains that the Earth today initially consisted of only water, more or less like a vast ocean. Such a belief of the Earth's origin can also be found in the mythologies of the Jahai tribe (Schebesta, 1973) and the Batek tribe (Endicott, 1979). The Semaq Beri myth narrates the tale of a mythological sandpiper bird called *Burung Kedidi* (*kawaul*) and a duck (*itek*) responsible for the Earth's formation. Initially, the duck spooned and shook out water using its beak until all mud was accumulated and became thick. The process was continued by the *kawaul* by raking and spinning the mud using its legs until the thick mud eventually became hard and vast as what the land on Earth is today.

The roles of the sandpiper bird in the formation process of the Earth are also found in the mythology of Earth's origin among the Batek tribe in Kelantan (Endicott, 1979). However, for the Batek tribe, apart from this myth which involves the story of the sandpiper bird, there is also another added version which highlights the involvement of the turtle (*labi-labi*) and serpent dragon (*naga ular*) as well as a version which states the Earth originated from foam (*buweh*) accumulated in the middle of the ocean.

The Semaq Beri tribe believe that during the beginning of creation the Earth did not have any form of life and plants on it. Such conditions continued for a certain period of time, until *Tohan* created two human beings (a male and a female) to live on Earth. Hence, the first humans sought to *Tohan* a number of things that would ease life on Earth which was then dry and barren. At first, the humans sought *Tohan* to create several types of trees to be used as clothing and be made into shelter. They also urged *Tohan* to create other trees in order to cover the ground and prevent the Earth from overheating and cracking. All these requests were granted by *Tohan*. The first trees created had propagated and had multiplied over time thus creating forests.

The two humans created by *Tohan* had married and thus increased the human population. This increase had created problems towards obtaining sustenance. To overcome this situation, human once again sought the assistance of *Tohan* to create fruit trees that could be made as food sources. It was told that the fruit trees were not directly created by *Tohan*, but through an event where *Tohan* commanded a human being to kill his own brother and chop of the flesh and disintegrate it. The flesh was then scattered on the ground and with the will of *Tohan*, each of the location where the flesh were left turned into a number of fruit trees such as rambutan, durian and mangoes.

*Tohan* had also created various types of animals to furthermore complement the sustenance needs for humans. It is also believed that the creation process of animals is similar to the creation process of fruit trees. *Tohan* had created all species of animals indirectly. Initially all types of animals were believed to originate from a group of humans. The process of transformation into animals occurred due to the curse of the *Sang Kelembai*, a representative of *Tohan* acting as guardian to humans.

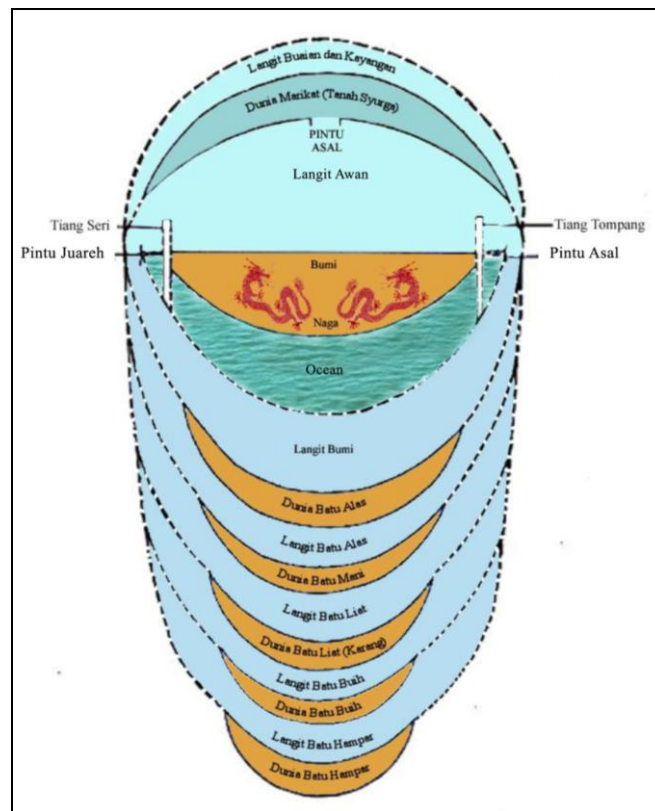
Once there existed the three elements as described above, namely humans, plants including fruit trees and animals, the Earth creation process was said to be complete. Hence the three elements were inseparable, and depended on one another in maintaining the sustainability of nature. Therefore, each of the three elements shall not exploit the other elements in an arbitrary manner.

##### **ii) Structure of the World**

The Semaq Beri tribe believes that the world does not only consist of layers that are visible to the naked eye. Instead, the world is made up of seven layers of earth and another seven layers of sky. Each layer of earth and sky is positioned alternately as shown in Figure 2. This belief element is similar to the beliefs of the Batek

tribe in Kelantan (Endicott, 1979) as well as the Chewong tribe in Pahang (Howell, 1984; 1982) which also believes that the world consists of a number of layers. For example, the Batek community believes that the world consists of seven layers of earth and seven layers of sky. However the Batek are unable to distinguish between each layer of earth with the other. According to Endicott (1979) the belief of the Batek community might have been influenced by the thoughts of the Muslim Malays who also believe that the world is made up of seven layers of earth and seven layers of sky, or what is often described to in Malay as '*tujuh petala langit dan tujuh petala bumi*'.

For the Semaq Beri tribe, each layer of earth and sky is clearly distinguished. Besides having specific names, each layer of earth and sky has its own rationale and own meaning in the context of their cosmological systems. The centre for these layers is Earth, which is the sixth layer. The Earth is a home to humans, animals and plants. On the whole, it is surrounded by the ocean. Its surface is flat and horizontal, while the bottom is curved in a shape resembling a cooking wok. In the Earth's bowels contains two serpent dragons referred to as *nenek* and *tok*. Both are positioned in opposite directions to one another. *Nenek* faces the east while *tok* faces the west. It is believed that *nenek* and *tok* plays a vital role in establishing the Earth's stability. Any forms of movement by *nenek* or *tok* will result in shaking like an earthquake to the earth. It is also believed that *nenek* and *tok* are believed to bring down punishments to guilty humans by sending earthquakes, floods and other forms of natural disasters. Apart from *nenek* and *tok*, the stability of the Earth is also determined by two pillars. First, the *tiang seri* (central pillar) which is situated at the most eastern edge of the Earth while the second, the *tiang tompang* (support pillar), and located at the most western edge of the Earth. The *tiang seri* and *tiang tompang* are magical elements which are sacred (*keramat*). It cannot be seen by ordinary humans except by the *semaq hala*'. If these two sacred pillars collapses or are destroyed by *Tohan*, this will result in the destruction to all forms of life on Earth.



**Fig. 2:** Structure of the world according to Semaq Beri tribe believes.

The Earth is deemed as a filthy place (*basek*) in terms of its contents of faecal matter (*ouik*) as well as the presence of many acts of immorality and evil wrongdoings of humans and animals living on it. Humans and animals that roam the Earth not only causes faecal matter to be scattered on it, but also with the vices inherited inside each individual leads to all sorts of negative behaviour such as jealousy, treachery, clashes and murders. The Earth is certainly a place filled with dirt and filth as well as the stage for human and animal misdeeds; therefore it is symbolically regarded as a 'hot' place as shown in Table 2 for summary of the properties of world layers in the cosmological systems of the Semaq Beri tribe.

On the top layer of the Earth is the seventh layer of the world known as *Dunia Marikat* or *Tanah Syurga*. The form of *Dunia Marikat* can not be clearly defined. However it is believed to be a much larger area compared to Earth. No plants and fruit tree exists here on *Dunia Marikat*. However, the conditions here are constantly shady and cool (*kerod*). This place is inhabited by *Tohan*, *Karei*, various other supernatural beings and deceased human spirits. As a place of residence for *Tohan* and various others supernatural beings and spirits, *Dunia Marikat* is regarded as a holy and pure place (*cerah*). The realm is serene; free from violence and all negativities such as clashes, jealousy, murders or bloodshed.

Below the Earth's surface exists five other world layers, starting with the fifth layer which is the nearest to Earth. This is followed by the fourth, third, second and first layer consecutively. Each layer has a specific name, beginning with *Batu Alas* for the fifth world layer, *Batu Mani* (fourth world layer), *Batu Liat/ Karang* (third world layer), *Batu Buih* (second world layer) and *Batu Hampar* (first world layer).

**Table 2:** Properties of world layers in the cosmological systems of the Semaq Beri tribe.

| World Layers                                                                                           | Properties                                                                                                                                                                                           | Inhabitants                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7 <sup>th</sup> World Layer - <i>Dunia Marikat (Tanah Syurga)</i>                                      | Holy<br>Clean<br>Shady<br>Cool<br>No storms<br>No thunders<br>No rain                                                                                                                                | <i>Tohan</i><br>Gods<br>Supernatural powers<br>Spirits of the deceased<br>Angels               |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> World Layer - <i>Bumi (Earth)</i>                                                      | Filthy (a place where much misdeeds occur, murders, persecution, oppression, scattered faecal and blood)<br>Heat<br>Storms<br>Thunders<br>Rain which leads to disasters such as diseases and floods. | Humans<br>Various animals<br>Fishes<br>Plants<br>Dragons ( <i>Nenek and Tok</i> )              |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> World Layer - <i>Batu Alas</i>                                                         | Filthy<br>Heat                                                                                                                                                                                       | Abode for demonic humans ( <i>Jin</i> )<br>Ghosts ( <i>Jembalang</i> )<br><i>Sang Kelembai</i> |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> – 1 <sup>st</sup> World Layers ( <i>Batu Mani, Batu Liat, Batu Buih, Batu Hampar</i> ) | Filthy<br>Heat                                                                                                                                                                                       | Devils ( <i>Iblis</i> )<br>Satan ( <i>Syaitan</i> )                                            |

The first five world layers are the realms inhabited by evil creatures that often threaten human life on Earth, such as inciting humans to clash, kill each other and also carry a variety of diseases to humans resulting in deaths. The *Batu Alas* abode is believed to be inhabited by demonic humans who suck on human blood. The *Batu Mani*, *Batu Liat (Karang)* and *Batu Buih* worlds are the abode of devils (*Iblis*) while the *Batu Hampar* world is the abode for Satan (*syaitan*). Although these beings (*Jin*, *Iblis* and *Syaitan*) live in different realms to humans, but they often trespass Earth to harass and incite humans.

As these five world layers are abodes of evil-natured beings, causing harm either to humans or other life forms on Earth, therefore these world layers are symbolically interpreted as filthy (*baset*) and hot (*becut*). There is also the opinion that states the filth of the world layers from the *Batu Alas* right up to *Batu Hampar* is attributed to its position being below the Earth layer; dirt and impurities coming from the Earth constantly falls and ends up on these layers.

As mentioned previously each world layer is alternated with a layer of the sky. These layers also have specific names, such as the *Langit Buaian Kayangan* (seventh layer), *Langit Awan* (sixth layer), *Langit Bumi* (fifth layer), *Langit Batu Alas* (fourth layer), *Langit Batu Karang* (third layer), *Langit Batu Buih* (second layer) and *Langit Batu Hampar* (first layer). The layer which is given much attention and is regarded as the most important is the *Langit Awan* (sixth layer) which is situated between the Earth's surface and the *Dunia Marikat* layer. It is said to be shaped like a large crater (*kawah*) positioned bottom-up with its lower ends touching the vast ocean surrounding the earth. In it are three gateways. First, the *Pintu Asal* gateway which is positioned on top. This entrance is a gateway to supernatural beings from the *Dunia Marikat* realm to enter Earth as well as to hover in the *Langit Awan* layer. It is also passage for deceased human spirits to rise up to the *Dunia Marikat*. The second gateway is *Pintu Juareh* located somewhere in the East and functions as the connecting bridge between *Langit Awan* and *Langit Bumi* located beneath the Earth. It is also the passageway for the sun, moon and stars to exit from beneath the Earth (from the *Langit Bumi* layer). The third and final gateway is named *Pintu Asal* which is located on the west side. It also functions as a connecting bridge between *Langit Awan* and *Langit Bumi* and is the path of the sun, moon and stars to descend below into the *Langit Bumi* layer.

The *Langit Awan* layer is considered important as it is the space which allows the sun (*Mak Tengah*), moon and stars (*Meloi*) to circulate around the Earth. In addition, it is also regarded as a place for supernatural beings to relax and wander when entering Earth to observe human behaviour or to execute a task commanded by *Tohan*. *Langit Awan* is also regarded as a filthy and hot place, similar to the characteristics of Earth. Such

images are given in view of its spatial conditions below which is filled with dust and constantly moving clouds. There is also an opinion that states this factor attributed to its location being near to Earth, causing part of the dirt coming from the Earth to be transferred into its layer.

The layer above *Langit Awan* is *Langit Buaian Kayangan* (seventh layer), situated above *Dunia Marikat*. This layer of sky is not considered important to human life on Earth. It is only the playground and resting place of supernatural beings. Due to this it is also said to have the image of a sacred, pure (*cerah*) and cool (*kerod*) place. If compared to the conditions in *Langit Awan*, the atmosphere here is the opposite (see Table 3).

The other layers of skies are the *Langit Bumi* (fifth layer), *Langit Batu Alas* (fourth layer), *Langit Batu Karang* (third layer), *Langit Batu Buih* (second layer) and *Langit Batu Hampar* (first layer) which are all layers of skies beneath *Langit Awan* (sixth layer), where each of these layers are alternated by a certain world layer. Similar to *Langit Buaian Kayangan*, these layers of skies are deemed unimportant to human life on Earth, except for *Langit Bumi* (fifth layer) which is the path or route for the sun, moon and stars to orbit the Earth. These layers of skies are only used by evil demonic creatures such as *jin*, *iblis* and *syaitan* as a resting and wandering place before invoking deceitful acts to humans and all other living creatures on Earth. Thus these layers of skies also portrays the image of filth and heat, as manifestations to the creatures inhabiting it that are ever malice and only presents ruin to humans on Earth.

**Table 3:** Properties of layers of skies in the cosmological systems of the Semaq Beri tribe.

| Layer of Sky                                                                                                               | Properties/ Status                                | Inhabitants                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7 <sup>th</sup> Layer - <i>Langit Buaian Kayangan</i>                                                                      | Holy<br>Pure<br>Cool                              | Abode where supernatural beings play.<br>Resting abode for the gallant ( <i>Karei</i> ) after hard work.                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> Layer - <i>Langit Awan</i>                                                                                 | Filthy: many clouds, fog, dust and smoke.<br>Heat | Abode where <i>Karei</i> performs duties commanded by <i>Tohan</i> , such as bringing down thunder, rain and storms.<br>Field where the winds prevail<br>Place where the sun is during daytime<br>Place where the moon and stars are during night time<br>Place where the clouds sail |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> Layer - <i>Langit Bumi</i>                                                                                 | Filthy<br>Heat                                    | Place where the moon and stars are during daytime<br>Place where the sun is during night time<br>Abode where demonic humans ( <i>jin</i> ) come to play                                                                                                                               |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> – 1 <sup>st</sup> Layers ( <i>Langit Batu Alas, Langit Batu Liat, Langit Buih and Langit Batu Hampar</i> ) | Filthy<br>Heat                                    | Abode where devils ( <i>iblis</i> ) come to play and wander<br>Abode where satan ( <i>syaitan</i> ) come to play                                                                                                                                                                      |

In general it can be concluded that the world from the perspectives of the Semaq Beri seems to exist in two sections. The first section consists of layers of the worlds and skies above the Earth while the second section are the various layers of the worlds and skies contained beneath the Earth layer. This division is based on the opposite properties of both sections. The first section is regarded as holy, pure, cool, the abode of *Tohan* as well as other supernatural beings, and a place free from any forms of natural disasters. On the other hand, the second section is believed to be a place of filth, heat, realms of malevolent spirits and a place frequented by catastrophes. On a clearer perspective, the properties evident in both sections indicates that the first section located above represents all things good, perfect and serene while the section situated below is conceptualised as misfortunate, imperfect and calamitous.

### iii) The Sun, Moon and Stars:

The sun, moon and stars are also considered as natural elements of importance. It is believed that the world at first was in total darkness, up to the point of human creation. The first humans created by *Tohan* had difficulties living in such dark conditions on Earth. They then called upon *Tohan* to create a form of light to illuminate the Earth. In return *Tohan* created the sun, moon and stars.

The sun was created by *Tohan* to illuminate the Earth during the day. Based on this property, the sun is also known to them as ‘daytime light of the Universe’. It is believed to be a huge iron ball that burns constantly and releases heat and light that illuminates the entire Earth. In addition, there is also the notion that states the sun as a large neon light bar. During daytime it is lit by *Tohan* and will be turned out during nightfall. Because this light is so big and releases large amounts of light, it becomes hot to the point that its heat can be felt on the Earth’s surface. With its heat properties the sun is considered as a violent element, producing heat which can cause anxiety and may lead to various diseases not only to life on Earth (humans, animals and trees) but also to other natural elements such as the moon and stars.

The sun constantly orbits around the Earth. During the day, the sun moves across the *Langit Awan* layer above the Earth. There is a notion that on *Langit Awan* there is a special path like a road which is always used by the sun to orbit the Earth. In addition there is also the belief that states the conditions of this layer of sky as an open area that may be used as a path to circumnavigate the Earth by the sun, moon and stars at any time.

During dusk the sun will be at the horizon of the *Langit Awan* layer to the west, and when night falls, it will enter the *Langit Bumi* layer through the *Pintu Asal* gateway. Throughout the night, the sun will move across the *Langit Bumi* layer. By dawn it will enter the *Pintu Juareh* gateway and will re-enter the *Langit Awan* horizon in the eastern side as day time begins.

The circulation of the sun orbiting the Earth as described above can also be found in the thoughts and beliefs of the Batek tribe. It is believed that during daytime the sun will cross over the skies at the highest position of all clouds. At night, the sun will enter the sea towards the west. It moves beneath the Earth throughout the night and will re-surface on the east in the morning (Endicott, 1979). The journey of the sun around the Earth is not an act of nature, but occurs due to the will of *Tohan*. In addition, there is also the notion that the journey of the sun is not carried out directly by *Tohan*, but by his aide named *Dahaya Mat Ali*. This circulation of the sun will happen all the time without ever ending.

The moon and stars are also believed to be creations of *Tohan* together with the sun during the time when humans sought for help in illuminating the Earth. If the sun is regarded as the 'daytime light of the Universe', the moon on the other hand is referred to as 'night-time light of the Universe'. The moon is believed to be a huge gemstone or also called *batu emas* (golden stone) capable of producing sparkling light to illuminate the Earth at night. Stars are the shattered fragments of this large gemstone during the time *Tohan* created the moon. There also exists the tale that says the soil on the moon is similar to Earth and is inhabited by supernatural beings. Although the moon produces light like the sun, but its properties are different. The moon does not emit heat; instead it creates cool and balmy conditions. Therefore, the moon is not considered as a violent element as the sun, but is regarded as having calm properties and its light will not cause any harm or diseases to life forms on Earth especially humans. Indeed, in the cosmological systems of the Semaq Beri the moon and sun are considered as two distant elements with opposite properties. Table 4 shows the properties of the sun and moon according to Semaq Beri tribe believes.

**Table 4:** Properties of the Sun and Moon according to Semaq Beri tribe believes.

| Sun                           | Moon                             |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| A burning earth globe         | A large gemstone (golden stone)  |
| Hot                           | Cool                             |
| Violent                       | Calm                             |
| Bold                          | Cowardice                        |
| Brings harm to humans         | Likable to humans                |
| Daytime light of the Universe | Night-time light of the Universe |
| Uninhabited                   | Inhabited by supernatural beings |

Similar to the sun, the moon and stars also orbit the Earth by following the path used by the sun. However, the moon and stars will not be in the same place with the sun. The sun's property which is violent and threatening causes the moon and stars to be constantly distant from it. Therefore, the moon and stars are always on the opposite side to where the sun is situated. Whenever the sun is at the *Langit Awan* layer (above the Earth), the moon and stars will be at the *Langit Bumi* layer (beneath the Earth). There is a story that says although the moon and stars are constantly avoiding contact with the sun, the sun is always chasing after the moon and stars. However, it is believed that sometimes the sun manages to threaten the moon which results in the lunar eclipse (*bulan dehana*).

Therefore, in the event of a lunar eclipse the Semaq Beri community reacts to repel the foe of the moon as well as to show sympathy over such a phenomenon. A number of rituals will be performed whenever a lunar eclipse occurs. A shaman (*bomoh*) will recite incantations; seek help from *Tohan* as well as other supernatural powers to prevent the sun from further harassment and threatening of the moon. At the same time ordinary tribe members will burn incense and will beat any kind of objects which produces loud noises such as empty tin containers, bamboo, wood and shout out loud in high-pitched voices. Such actions are to surprise the sun and make it realise of its harassing acts and eventually returning to its supposed location. In addition to the above acts, in the event of a lunar eclipse all community members are advised to be outdoors. Members will gather at open areas or house compounds as a show of sympathy and saddened by the unfortunate event happening to the moon.

### Conclusion:

In summary it can be said that the Semaq Beri believe that the Universe which encompasses the Earth, sun, moon and stars did not exist naturally, but was created by the supernatural powers, in line with various other schools of thought throughout the world including ancient Greek and Chinese civilisations. The roles of the supernatural powers cover the formation of the Universe as well as setting its order.

Each element of nature was created by the supernatural powers with its own structures and functions based upon the locations and functions of the Earth, sun, moon and stars. The Earth, which is the primary element, is believed to consist of seven world and seven sky layers. Each world layer has its own inhabitants and has distinctive properties different from one another, i.e. being holy or filthy, pure or evil, etc. Based on the

properties and functions of each world layer shows that the thoughts of the Semaq Beri divides the Earth into two sections. The first section consists of world and sky layers located above the Earth while the second sections are the world and sky layers contained beneath it. Both sections have opposite properties and characteristics. The first section is believed to be realms and abodes that are holy, pure, cool and free from natural disasters while the second section is regarded as dirty, hot and catastrophic. In terms of its inhabitants, the first section is the abode of *Tohan* and other supernatural beings, while the second section as places for humans as well as other evil and malevolent forces.

The thoughts and knowledge of the Semaq Beri also shows that the sun, moon and stars as part of the elements of the Universe which functions are determined by the supernatural powers ever since the dawn of creation with each having different classifications and being opposite from one another. To furthermore clarify this difference the Semaq Beri established the concepts of 'daytime light of the Universe' for the sun and 'night-time light of the Universe' for the moon and stars.

The thought of the Semaq Beri towards the Universe which is an element within their belief system also influences daily behaviour among members of the community. Among them, exists certain ritual practices, such as rituals in the context of human relationships with the supernatural powers which acts as creator of the Universe, rituals in the context of human relationships with plants and animals, as well as rituals related to natural phenomena such as the occurrence of lunar eclipse.

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