

**THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDBIRTH:
A STUDY AMONG THE MOLBOG COMMUNITY
OF BANGGI ISLAND, SABAH, MALAYSIA**



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HUMANITIES
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**THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF
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**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND
HUMANITIES
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

16 December 2021

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ABSTRACT

Given that remote island communities are often left with limited access to health facilities, especially with regard to pregnancy and childbirth, it comes to no surprise that traditional birthing methods and customs are still widely practiced among the Molbog community of Banggi Island, Sabah, Malaysia. Yet, the documentation of traditional home birthing practices among the Molbog is relatively unheard of. Thus, the main objective of this research was to explore the anthropology of childbirth concerning prenatal care, birth and postpartum practices among the Molbog. An ethnographic approach was used in the data collection that involved living in among the Molbog, observing childbirth and documenting various taboos, bathing practices, and uses of herbal medicine, as well as conducting a series of in-depth interviews with women, family members, village elders and the highly esteemed *po'ngungulin* (female traditional birth attendants). A second objective of the research was to identify the factors that influence or encourage the Molbog community to continue practising home birth. The current overall scenario is of generally benevolent control of the Molbog women practising their childbirth traditions paralleled with minor forms of medical interventions, especially during prenatal care. Unfortunately, the Molbog community is currently experiencing an increasing medicalization of childbirth and the imminent disappearance of knowledge of traditional childbirth and maternal health practices, when the *po'ngungulin* are no longer around.

ABSTRAK

ANTROPOLOGI KELAHIRAN BAYI: KAJIAN DALAM KALANGAN KOMUNITI MOLBOG DI PULAU BANGGI, SABAH, MALAYSIA

Memandangkan masyarakat pulau terpencil sering mengalami akses terhad kepada kemudahan kesihatan, terutamanya berkaitan kehamilan dan bersalin, maka tidak hairanlah kaedah dan amalan bersalin tradisional masih diamalkan secara meluas dalam masyarakat Molbog di Pulau Banggi, Sabah, Malaysia. Namun begitu, dokumentasi amalan tradisional bersalin di rumah dalam kalangan Molbog amat jarang didengari. Oleh itu, objektif utama penyelidikan ini adalah untuk meneroka antropologi kelahiran bayi termasuklah berkaitan dengan penjagaan pranatal, kelahiran dan amalan selepas bersalin dalam kalangan Molbog. Pendekatan etnografi telah digunakan dalam pengumpulan data dengan tinggal bersama dengan masyarakat Molbog, memerhati kelahiran bayi dan mendokumentasikan pelbagai pantang larang, amalan mandi berpantang, dan penggunaan ubat herba, serta menjalankan beberapa siri temubual mendalam dengan wanita, ahli keluarga, golongan orang tua dan dikalangan mereka yang lebih berpengalaman di dalam kampung serta po'ngungulin (bidan kampung) yang amat dihormati. Objektif kedua penyelidikan adalah untuk mengenalpasti faktor yang mempengaruhi atau menggalakkan komuniti Molbog untuk bersalin di rumah. Senario keseluruhan semasa adalah secara amnya kebajikan wanita Molbog masih terkawal dengan amalan tradisi bersalin mereka selari dengan sedikit campur tangan perubatan moden, khususnya dalam penjagaan pranatal. Malangnya, komuniti Molbog pada masa ini mengalami peningkatan campur tangan perubatan moden (medicalization) dalam kelahiran bayi, serta kehilangan pengetahuan tentang amalan tradisional bersalin dan kesihatan ibu, terutamanya apabila po'ngungulin sudah tiada lagi.

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LIST OF GLOSSARIES

<i>Abang/Bang</i>	simply meant an elder brother; referring to a male as <i>abang</i> or <i>bang</i> is showing a form of respect
<i>adat</i>	local customs
<i>air jampi</i>	water that has been blessed or incantation was spoken onto the water
<i>anak angkat</i>	adopted child
<i>aqiqah</i>	An Islamic tradition of the sacrifice of an animal on the occasion of a child's birth
<i>baggo</i>	a type of wild edible plant
<i>Bapa</i>	father
<i>barang mogislaman</i>	ritual items require for the female circumcision
<i>basumbur</i>	a form of incantation
<i>bidan kampung</i>	local traditional midwife
<i>biggat</i>	an illness experienced by postpartum women
<i>bolbalan</i> or <i>balan-balan</i>	is believed a human being whose head allegedly can detach from their body and capable of flying about on its own and as it flies, the stomach and entrails dangle below it. This creature also who wants to drink the blood of childbirth and new-born babies
<i>boliyan</i> or <i>bolian</i>	a local shaman (traditional healer); such practice is dominated by male, especially influential and well-respected male senior citizens in the Molbog community
<i>cupak</i>	a traditional rice measurement equivalent to approximately 600 grams
<i>darat</i>	any houses further inland 500 meters from the beach will be identified as <i>darat</i>
<i>fitriah bayi</i>	new-born alms
<i>gantang</i>	a traditional rice measurement equivalent to two kilograms of rice
ghusl	the act of purifying all parts of the bodies in order to become pure (Arabic word)

<i>gunting sanda'</i>	the baby's first haircut that coincides with the recitation of adhan at the baby's ears for the very first time
<i>ibalgo</i>	<i>boliyan's</i> ritual associates in the te'dogan healing ritual
Isha	Evening prayer, one of the daily obligatory prayers which is observed after sunset (Arabic word)
<i>jauran</i>	bamboo fishing rod
Kak/Kakak	elder sister; referring to a female as Kak or Kakak is showing a form of respect
<i>kenduri arwah</i>	a tahleel feast to commemorate the deceased
<i>ketua kampung</i>	head villager
<i>ketupat</i>	a diamond-shaped container of woven palm leaf pouch
<i>kulat punti</i>	edible wild mushroom
<i>kusoud mongisi uruh</i>	"the one who is knowledgeable at collecting medicinal plants"; a local herbalist and this also applies to a <i>po'ngungulin</i> , <i>boliyan</i> and <i>ponambur</i> because these individuals use medical plants extensively
<i>lotogon</i>	a seated healing ritual carried out by a <i>boliyan</i> , which will last for three evenings
Makcik/Babu/Bu	aunt; referring to a female as "Makcik" or "Babu" or simply "Bu" in the Sabah Malay dialect is showing a form of respect.
<i>mandi mayang</i>	palm flower shower which was carried out in a te'dogan ritual
<i>mogboglat</i>	stomach massage
<i>mogislam libun</i>	female coming of age rite; symbolic cutting, nicking the clitoral hood to draw blood, scraping it, to cutting the tip of the clitoris
<i>momukah lowung</i>	engagement negotiation
<i>mongibog</i>	craving or sudden urge for particular food
<i>monjú</i>	simple ritual shower including post <i>mogislam libun</i> ritual, postpartum ritual shower and after a healing ritual.
<i>montung</i>	pregnant
<i>niyah hayd</i>	the intention of performing the ghusl for menstruation (<i>hayd</i>) (Arabic word)

<i>nosobit</i>	a mild discomfort during pregnancy such as cramping
<i>ogkowa'an</i>	miscarriage
<i>ogsungkiton</i>	tip of the clitoris
<i>onitu</i>	a type of fern plant used as traditional medicine
Pakcik	uncle; referring to a male elder as pakcik is showing a form of respect
<i>po'ngungulin</i>	local midwife and the traditional birth attendant in the Molbog community
<i>pogpantang</i>	confinement practices
<i>pomuttok</i>	giving birth or labour
<i>ponambur</i>	an individual who performs <i>basumbur</i> (who has knowledge of reciting a prayer) for various incidents/emergencies such as sickness and illness
<i>pongambit</i>	female birth assistant who holds and supports the woman's knees during labour; indecent scenarios such as accidentally lifted sarong may occur so it is more appropriate to have a female <i>pongambit</i>
<i>po-ngugas</i>	a daily concoction herbal bath and drink during confinement period
<i>ponju'u ogruhu on bulan</i>	lunar eclipse
<i>ponumag</i>	birth assistant who specializes in "retaining" the baby in its position when the woman in labour takes a break from pushing; at the right moment, the <i>ponumag</i> will conduct the fundal pressure during the last push of labour
<i>rancangan</i>	a house replica representing the patient's body
<i>sedekah</i>	alms which costs a small amount of money
<i>sibod</i>	shellfish
<i>sulambow korama</i>	bamboo crab trap
<i>sulap</i>	small hut, temporary dwelling place erected in an agricultural plot (paddy field, vegetable garden, fruit orchard and rubber tree plantation)
<i>sulimbar</i>	a form of illness experienced by pregnant women