

## Ulasan Buku/ *Book Review*

### *Malay Poisons and Charm Cures*

by John D. Gimlette (M.R.C.S, L.R.C.P), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971. ISBN: 9789745241442

Dr. John D. Gimlette who served 18 years in the Government of Federated Malay States as a medical practitioner has published a remarkable study on *Malay Poisons and Charm Cures*. His ten years of tenure in Kelantan starting from 1909 afforded him the opportunity to collect extensive data on Malay poisons. According to Dr. Gimlette, this edition is a notable advance on earlier works in the field. During the process of making and publishing this outstanding work, he faced the challenge of understanding the local language and culture with limited time to publish this book. Fortunately, he was helped by many experts from the colonial office in Singapore, SOAS, London University, Zoological Institute, Amsterdam, Dr. R. O. Winstedt and Sir Hugh Clifford. He felt indebted to Dr. R. O. Winstedt for awarding him the grant to publish this edition in 1915. In this book, Dr. Gimlette also acknowledged Dato' Megat Lela 'diraja, the Secretary to the Kelantan Ecclesiastical Council (Majlis Agama Islam) who translated some passages related to the black art and two "medicine-men" named To' Bomor Haji Awang and To' Bomor Enche' Harun bin Seman who disclosed the secrets of their practises. According to Dr. Gimlette, the colonial officers knew very little about Malay poison. Their information on Malay poison possibly limited to Ridley's "Materia Medica" published in Agricultural Bulletins of the Strait Settlements in 1906 and some botanical specimens investigated in Herbarium, Singapore.

For those interested in knowing about Malay poisons and charm cures, this book is one of the best sources. During Dr. Gimlette's service in Kelantan, he came across many cases related to diseases associated with black magic. His idea to work on the collection of Malay poisons and antidotes contributed significantly as a medico-legal reference in the Lower Courts of Law in Malaya!

The greatest advantage of reading this book is to learn the scientific knowledge of toxicology and therapeutic remedies besides acquiring information on stories and court cases about victims who has been poisoned or charmed.

In chapter one, he tried to get a handle of the different motives for poisoning among Malays. He mentioned general rules and reasons of poisoning. His classification between intoxicating (*mabuk*) and deadly (*racun*) is useful. Later, he compared the poisons used in Kelantan and India in terms of ingredients, tools, type, doses and methods. In this chapter, he discussed methods used to poison the victims like using different types of *keris* (daggers) endowed with magical properties. Betel chewing was another old method of poisoning people. The third method is using blood for love and gambling charms. He added that there were time-based poisons which when administered could lead to a fatality some three months, six months and up to three years later. Dr. Gimlette affirmed that there are two types of reactions from poisoning from plants or animals. The person who chewed, swallowed or inhaled the poisonous ingredients whether it is solely plant based or a mixture of other plants, fruits or fauna can experience intoxication (*mabuk*) with some noxious ingredients causing death. The author also identifies ways by which to identify criminals who possess poisons.

In chapter two, Dr. Gimlette wrote about the works of a *bomoh* (medicine-man) in relation to the clinical medicine. The origin of magic practice was seen either from Indian myth or Arab quasi-science. Dr. Gimlette classified the work of *bomoh* into several categories. Firstly, is 'poisoning *bomoh*' who specialises in poisons and charms. Another is the 'spirit-rising *bomoh*' which is best regarded as a priest-physician and professes to rule demons by means of special invocations. In this chapter, he also explicated about the plants, animals and diseases associated with *hantu* (ghosts, evil spirits and goblins). In the Islamic point of view, he clarified the connection between *hantu* and *jin* based on W. Skeat's doctrine on four natural properties of humanity. He also took account of the work of the *bomoh* in relation to clinical medicine with reference to Malay taboo.

The core of Dr. Gimlette's research is the description of charms and amulets. In chapter three, charms and magic rites from several departments of nature such as wind and weather, bird, beast, vegetation, mining and reptiles were discussed in brief. He added the process of rites by the *bomoh* with reference to local folklore. He also explained bezoar stones endowed by Malays with magic properties called *batu geliga* worn as amulets against disease and evil spirits. Besides bezoar stone, *batu ular* or snake stone which is an amalgam of gold, silver and tin is used to heal wounds inflicted by poison. *Batu ular* was also used as a protective charm by thieves.

Chapter four is a brief discussion of the black arts in Malay medicine like *Main Mok Pek*, *Main Gĕbiah*, *Main Pĕtĕri*, *Main Bĕrhantu*, *Main Bĕrjin*, *Main Orang Bunian*, *Main Bĕrbagih* for which their origins, special attire and unique performances were described.

Later in chapter five, Dr. Gimlette explained spells and soothsaying. The Malay mystic belief in magic can be traced back to Malay, Arab, and Indian sources. Dr. Gimlette discussed evidence in manuscripts, philosophy and purpose of making a diagnosis among Malay *bomoh*. He also compared the different methods of Malay magical rites from different authors like 'water-gazing' and 'magic square' of Skeat's Malay Magic, 'Malay Sketches' of Swettenham and Mr. Worthington's 'mystic square'. There is also poison obtained by Malays from fishery kingdom like *ikan kĕli* (catfish), *ikan sĕmbilang*, *ikan siya*, *ikan buntal* and other fishes. Their toxin or venom is a poisonous property used

by criminals and is administered internally. Apart from their poisonous feature, some are used to cure certain diseases which he discussed in this chapter.

In the next chapter, Dr. Gimlette explained the preparation of poison of reptiles, amphibians, insects, millipedes, and molluscs. He did a great job categorising poisons from jungle plants by listing seven poisonous plants and the description of each component that is poisonous. In chapter eight, Dr. Gimlette classified poisons of vegetable origins into seven types, and these were sorted under intoxicant, narcotic or toxic. He concludes his study of Malay poisons from inorganic sources such as arsenic, cyanide of potassium, mercury, powdered glass and sand and quicklime powder in chapter nine.

His inclusion of valuable information such as sacrificial prayers, the formula to cast out forest spirits, demons, diseases, *pěleşit*, along with his classification of poisonous plants together with their botanical name is useful. He added a list of poisons obtained from animals that have been categorised by their Malay name, scientific name, habitat, active principal and pharmacology.

Overall, he did a great research on Malay poison but lacked evidence on charm cures. He mentioned the cure for some poison is by using fresh coconut water. This useful book is unique as it not only explained Malay poisons but indicated that some criminal cases in Kelantan included the use of poison. I believe that this book will successfully reach the readers because of its flowing style and ease of reading.

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