Ritual and Reality: The Practice of Gabag Gelap and Cultural Transformation of the Temiar Community in RPS Kuala Betis

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ABSTRACT

Gabag Gelap is a traditional performance art of the Temiar community that integrates elements of dance, song, music, and cultural symbolism within both ritual and social contexts. Beyond serving as a form of entertainment, it functions as a medium of healing, spiritual communication, and communal identity reinforcement. This study explores the transformations in the practice of *Gabag Gelap* among the Temiar community in RPS Kuala Betis, Gua Musang. Employing an ethnographic approach, the research focuses on three main aspects: (i) ritual practices of *Gabag Gelap,* (ii) the influence of nature and belief systems in ritual practice, and (iii) the cultural transformations shaping its continuity. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, with primary data collected through in-depth interviews with community leaders, traditional healers, *Tok Halak*, and individuals who continue to participate in these selectively performed rituals. Data were thematically analyzed to identify the dynamics of ritual performance, the role of nature and spiritual belief, and the shifting application of *Gabag Gelap* in the modern era. Framed within cultural anthropology and ethnography, the research examines the relationship between ritual, cultural identity, and the processes of social change. Findings indicate that although *Gabag Gelap* is increasingly marginalized due to formal education, religious propagation, and socio-economic development in RPS settlements, it remains an enduring pillar of Temiar cultural heritage, preserved by a small number of selected *Tok Halak*. The ritual continues to serve vital functions in healing, community protection, and the reinforcement of social solidarity. Nevertheless, social transformation has altered its modes of performance and symbolic values. The study underscores the importance of recognizing and safeguarding this tradition through systematic documentation, community-based education, and the integration of cultural values into Orang Asli development policies. This research makes a significant contribution to academic understanding of how the Temiar community negotiates between tradition and modernity, and its implications for the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage in Malaysia.

Keywords: Gabag Gelap, Temiar, Performance Art, Cultural Transformation, Cultural Continuity

INTRODUCTION

The Orang Asli are the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, comprising various sub-ethnic groups, among which the Temiar community is notable for its distinctive cultural system, beliefs, and customs. Their cultural identity is closely interwoven with the natural environment, collective social structures, and spiritual practices transmitted orally across generations. Nature serves as the central axis of Temiar life and belief, shaping their daily existence as well as their artistic and ritual expressions. Consequently, every element of their cultural performance and ritual practice is deeply rooted in a spiritual relationship with the surrounding environment.

The Orang Asli are the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, constituting approximately 0.7% of the national population, with an estimated population of around 217,000 (JAKOA, 2019). They are categorized into three main groups: the Senoi, the Proto-Malay, and the Negrito.

Figure 1.1: The Orang Asli Communities in Malaysia

Source: JAKOA (2025)

Each of these groups possesses its own language, customs, belief systems, and ways of life, yet they share a common principle that places the natural environment at the center of existence. The Temiar belong to the Senoi group and are among the largest and most widely distributed sub-ethnic communities, particularly in the states of Kelantan, Perak, and Pahang. They maintain a harmonious relationship with nature through activities such as hunting, shifting cultivation, as well as traditional healing practices and cultural rituals grounded in animistic beliefs and spiritual connections with natural entities. In their daily lives, Temiar social structure is rooted in collectivism, where relationships among community members are built upon values of mutual assistance, resource sharing, and respect for customary traditions.

Gabag Gelap is a traditional performance art of the Temiar community, rich in aesthetic value, cultural symbolism, and spiritual dimensions. It is typically conducted at night in darkness and forms part of healing rituals or the expulsion of malevolent forces within traditional Temiar belief systems (Sahar, 2020). The performance integrates elements of chanting and song, bodily movement, sounds of nature, the playing of traditional bamboo instruments, and the invocation of spirits through incantations and mantras. Beyond its role in healing, *Gabag Gelap* also serves as a medium for transmitting social values, oral histories, and the cosmological structures of Temiar society in both verbal and performative forms.

Nevertheless, within the contemporary cultural landscape increasingly shaped by modernization, formal education, and external religious influences, *Gabag Gelap* faces significant pressures that challenge its continuity as a lived practice. The performance is now rarely enacted, and when it is performed, it often appears in adapted forms rather than in its original state. These pressures directly affect the sustainability of this traditional performance art, which has long been a cornerstone of Temiar cultural identity. Within the Temiar community, *Gabag Gelap* is not merely a medium of spiritual healing, but also a form of spiritual communication, reverence for ancestral spirits, and a means of strengthening communal bonds. This phenomenon can also be observed in other ritual traditions of the Orang Asli and indigenous communities in Southeast Asia, many of which share similar functions and symbolic foundations. For instance, the *Semaq Beri* of Terengganu practice the *piyey* ritual, which serves as both a form of traditional healing and a communal purification rite to ward off disease and misfortune. The ceremony is intended to sustain balance between humans, nature, and spiritual forces. The Mah Meri of Selangor, meanwhile, perform the *jo'oh* dance as a medium to engage with ancestral spirits and natural forces, underscoring the continuity of spiritual and social dimensions in their performative arts (Marina, 1993). This comparative lens can be extended further to East Malaysia. The Kadazan Dusun in Penampang, Sabah, perform the *bambaazon* ritual, which centers on the rice

spirit personified as *bambaazon*. Accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of gongs and the *sumazau* dance, the ritual serves both as an expression of gratitude and a prayer for abundant harvests (Hanafi, 2003). Similarly, the Bidayuh in Sarawak observe the *nguguoh* ritual, a form of rice-spirit worship conducted before the Gawai festival. Led by the *dayung borih* (female shaman), the ritual combines incantatory songs, traditional music, and communal dance as acts of reverence to the spirit of rice (Aman & Michael, 1989). Although these rituals differ in form, musical instruments, and cosmological frameworks, they reveal a consistent regional pattern: the intimate interconnection of music, dance, supernatural belief, and ecological harmony. Situating *Gabag Gelap* within this comparative framework underscores that it is not merely an exclusive ritual of the Temiar people but part of a broader Southeast Asian performative tradition that emphasizes equilibrium between humans, spirits, and the natural world.

The *Gabag Gelap* ritual is highly exclusive and sacred, as it can only be conducted under the leadership of a *Tok Halak*, the spiritual custodian who holds the customary legitimacy to preside over the performance. However, in the present context, the number of qualified *Tok Halak* has significantly declined due to the absence of successors willing or able to shoulder this responsibility. This has emerged as a major factor contributing to the discontinuity of *Gabag Gelap* in its original form. Furthermore, the practice is intentionally restricted by the Temiar themselves from being performed before outsiders, in order to avoid spiritual imbalance, disruption of the summoned spirits, and the dilution of its ritual meaning. Thus, *Gabag Gelap* is threatened not only by internal challenges of succession and transmission but also by external pressures from the broader socio-cultural environment.

Within a cultural environment increasingly shaped by modernization, formal education, the spread of external religions, and economic pressures, *Gabag Gelap* has undergone transformations in both form and function. Its practice is no longer carried out with the frequency of the past, and when it does occur, it is often presented in adapted versions rather than in its traditional, original form. Although earlier documentation exists, such as that conducted by Sahar (2020), such studies primarily focus on the structure and content of *Gabag Terang*. There remains, therefore, a significant gap in research that critically examines this cultural shift from the perspective of the Temiar community itself, particularly within the framework of contemporary social change. This study is thus undertaken to empirically investigate the ritual experience of *Gabag Gelap*, its dependence on the natural environment, and the cultural transformations surrounding its practice among the Temiar community in Kuala Betis, Gua Musang.

This study is significant as it emphasizes performance art as a central medium of cultural negotiation and the articulation of collective identity within minority communities. It offers new insights into how indigenous groups adapt their cultural practices amidst the pressures of external values and internal constraints. Furthermore, the study contributes to the development of intangible heritage preservation policies by providing a foundation for intercultural education, visual documentation, and formal recognition of indigenous traditions. Most importantly, it gives voice and agency to the community itself, allowing them to articulate the cultural meanings they inherit and the challenges they face in sustaining rituals such as *Gabag Gelap* in an era of rapid social change.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative approach grounded in an ethnographic design, with primary emphasis on fieldwork conducted within the Orang Asli community of Gua Musang. The central objective of this approach was to obtain first-hand data through direct interaction and observation of the local community. In addition, secondary data were collected from supporting sources such as academic journals, books, and related articles, thereby strengthening the overall understanding of the subject matter and situating the observed cultural phenomenon within a broader context. During the fieldwork period, the researcher engaged directly with the community through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with local figures, including the *Tok Batin*, *Tok Penghulu*, and other community members actively involved in *Gabag Gelap* performances. This sustained interaction enabled the researcher to gain insights into the cultural context and social dynamics closely connected with the practice. Fieldwork was carried out over approximately one month, during which the researcher spent considerable time with key informants to build trust and gain deeper access to knowledge. Three principal informants were purposively selected and identified as IR1, IR2, and IR3. Semi-structured

interviews and participant observation served as the primary methods of data collection, allowing for a holistic exploration of cultural transformations in *Gabag Gelap* performances. Conducted with key figures such as the *Tok Bellian, Tok Pek Ta,* musicians, dancers (*bersisek*), and the village headman. These conversational approaches enabled the collection of deeper narratives without placing pressure on informants, in line with Spradley's (1979) recommendation that friendly, informal exchanges are more effective when working with indigenous communities. Complementary secondary data from existing literature provided theoretical support and broadened the scope of the discussion. An important dimension of the methodology was the researcher's positionality. As an outsider, trust was cultivated through intermediaries such as the village headman and *Tok Bellian*. This not only facilitated access to the ritual but also fostered reciprocal trust, enabling a more nuanced understanding of cultural meanings. Nonetheless, limitations persisted where some aspects of the ritual could not be recorded or disclosed due to their esoteric nature. Such restrictions inevitably affected the depth of analysis but, at the same time, required the researcher to practice reflexivity and respect cultural boundaries. From an ethical standpoint, data collection was carried out with the community's consent, and all documentation was conducted with sensitivity to local customs and taboos. To balance academic objectives with cultural respect, the analysis emphasized symbolic interpretation and the social functions of the ritual, rather than revealing sacred details deemed restricted. In conclusion, this clearer articulation of methodology highlights that the study of Gabag Gelap is not merely an observation of cultural phenomena, but rather an ongoing negotiation between researcher, community, and ritual**.** By openly acknowledging limitations and adhering to ethical sensitivity, the research achieves both academic rigor and respect for the community at the center of the study. The collected data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software, which facilitated systematic coding and thematic categorization through thematic analysis. The integration of both primary and secondary data enabled the study to be conducted in a systematic and comprehensive manner, thereby offering an in-depth understanding of the ritual practice of *Gabag Gelap* among the Temiar and the cultural transformations influencing its continuity.

The Practice of the Gabag Gelap Ritual in Temiar Society

Gabag Gelap represents one of the most significant traditional rituals in the life of the Temiar community. It serves as a spiritual bridge between humans and the supernatural realm, embodying the animistic belief system that sustains the Temiar's close relationship with the natural environment and with spiritual entities such as ancestral and animal spirits. Within Temiar society, *Gabag Gelap* is not merely a ceremonial rite but also functions as a social and therapeutic mechanism that reinforces balance between humans, nature, and the spirit world. Specifically, *Gabag Gelap* is conducted in complete darkness, a fundamental condition believed to enable spirits and ancestral forces to be present and to interact with the *Tok Bomoh* or *Tok Halak*, who holds the responsibility of leading the ritual. According to interviews with informants, it was stated that

> *"Sewang dalam gelap ni adalah berunsurkan kepada roh-roh yang hadir ke dalam sewang itu. Tidak dibenarkan ternampak benda-benda cahaya. Jika ternampak benda-benda cahaya, kilat dan sebagainya, dia lari."* (IR1)

This statement reflects a central concept in the *Gabag Gelap* ritual, closely tied to the presence of spirits. Within Temiar tradition, light is regarded as a disruptive element that may interfere with or diminish the ritual process, as it is believed to obstruct communication between the *Tok Halak* and the spirits in attendance. If light such as flashes of lightning or the glow of fire appears during the *Gabag Gelap* ritual, it is believed that the spirits will "flee," thereby disrupting the communication between the spiritual entities and the ritual leader. The informants' assertion that darkness is essential for the ritual aligns with the findings of Roseman (1991), who emphasized that the dark setting of the ceremony carries profound spiritual justification. Darkness is perceived as the medium that enables the spirits to be present without the interference of light, which is thought to repel them. This perception also constitutes a social norm within Temiar society, requiring strict adherence as a marker of respect for the ritual, ensuring its validity and effectiveness. According to Sahar (2020), *Gabag Gelap* is typically conducted at night, usually between 8:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.

The performance of *Gabag Gelap* within Temiar society is not bound to fixed dates or specific seasons; rather, it is determined by the will and directive of the *Tok Halak* himself. According to interviews with informants, it was noted that

"Gabag gelap ni dia bukan dikira apa ni masa dan sebagainya. Dia kira atas kemahuan tok pawang itu sendiri. Dia nak bersewang, dia nak berjamu, dia nak apa dengan apa ni roh-roh, dia kena buat. Kalau dia tak buat, jadi masalah. Ada hajat dia." (IR1)

As highlighted by the informants, *Gabag Gelap* is performed only when the *Tok Halak* issues the instruction or gives a sign that the ritual must be conducted. The *Tok Halak* is entrusted with full authority and responsibility to lead and oversee the ceremony, as he is regarded as a figure possessing extraordinary abilities and powers not shared by other members of the community. He holds the unique capacity to communicate with the spirits invoked to assist the Temiar people. The *Gabag Gelap* performance takes place in a ritual hall known as the *paro*. The *paro* is constructed using young tree trunks and bamboo. According to Sahar (2020), the *paro* is built with the purpose of providing comfort and a welcoming space for ancestral spirits to be present during the ritual. Once completed, the *paro* is decorated with various types of plants, such as *daun bertam*, until the entire space is almost fully adorned with foliage prior to the commencement of the performance.

Figure 1.2: Paro Gabag

Figure 1.3: Ornemantation Inside the *Paro*

Source: Sahar (2020)

The *Tok Bomoh* or *Tok Halak* plays a highly critical role in this ritual. The selection of a *Tok Halak* cannot be made arbitrarily; rather, it is based on spiritual qualifications acquired through a process of apprenticeship (*berguru*), whereby the individual must possess profound spiritual belief and experiential knowledge. According to Benjamin (1986), the *Tok Halak* is the central figure who serves as the medium between the human world and the spirit realm. In the context of the *Gabag Gelap* ritual, the presence of the *Tok Halak* is not only as a ceremonial leader but also as a "temporary dwelling" for ancestral and animal spirits to manifest. This process is deeply personal, typically involving only the *Tok Halak* without the presence of large audiences or community gatherings. In fact, the presence of others—particularly children—is considered disruptive to the ritual and potentially dangerous to the process of spirit invocation. This is because during the ritual the *Tok Halak* enters a state of trance. Within Temiar society, the ability of the *Tok Halak* to achieve a trance state signifies that he has successfully established communication with the spirits and is therefore

qualified to preside over the ceremony (Benjamin, 1986). In this trance condition, the *Tok Halak* loses ordinary consciousness, and his speech or actions are regarded as manifestations or communicative expressions of the spirits present, expressions that are often unintelligible to ordinary members of the community. According to interviews with informants, it was noted that

> *"Semasa dia sewang tu ingatan dia hilang. Jadi ingatan yang ada tu adalah Ingatan daripada roh-roh macam tu. Jadi, kalau dia bercakap pun, dia berkomunikasi pon, cara yang bukan kita cakap, Bukan yang kita guna"* (IR2)

The informants' statements provide a profound insight into the spiritual experiences embedded within the *Gabag Gelap* ritual of the Temiar community. In this context, the loss of memory experienced by the *Tok Halak* during the ritual should not be understood as ordinary forgetfulness, but rather as a transition of consciousness in which the invoked spirits are believed to temporarily assume control and communicate through him. This phenomenon reflects the animistic worldview in which spirits are regarded as capable of interacting with humans through designated mediums. Marina Roseman (1991), in her study of the Temiar, explains that in ceremonies such as *sewang*, the *Tok Halak* undergoes a trance state in which consciousness is altered, allowing spirits to be present and to provide guidance and healing through mediums or forms of communication distinct from ordinary human language. Thus, the informants' accounts can be interpreted as evidence of a transformative and spiritual experience within the *Gabag Gelap* ritual, wherein the *Tok Halak* relinquishes ordinary consciousness to create a space for the spirits to enter and communicate through him.

Prior to the commencement of the ritual, several types of leaves such as *daun nipah* and *daun bertam* are arranged together to form a circular structure known as the *bumbun*. At its center, flowers and fragrant leaves are placed as offerings to the spirits invited to attend the ceremony. According to interviews with informants, it was noted that

> *"Bumbun ni dia Buat pula Dengan apa ni Daun-daun apa ni nipah, bertam, tak kisahlah. dia seorang saja masuk dalam masuk dalam itu, lepas itu dia berdiri. langkah pertama dia mendoakan majlis itu supaya aman dan damai, lepas itu dia memanggil memanggil kepada roh-roh yang dia perolehi."*
>
> (IR2)
>
> *"kalau roh ini datang dulu, dia sewang dia tu lah dulu. Lepas tu siap dia tu, balik. Bila dia sampai situ, kalau ikut syarat-syarat dan cara-cara yang digunakan, dia masuk ke situ, dia hasrat pertamanya lah untuk menghisap bau-bau bunga dan apa yang ada di dalam bunga tu."*
>
> (IR3)

The informants' accounts indicate that leaves such as *nipah* and *bertam* are employed as primary materials in the construction of ritual structures, carrying profound symbolic and spiritual significance. Access to the *bumbun* is restricted exclusively to the *Tok Halak*, who alone is permitted to enter this sacred space.

Figure 1.4: Temiar Women Picking Flowers for the *Gabag Gelap* Ritual

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

The *Tok Halak* begins the ritual by offering prayers for peace and tranquility, serving as a spiritual preparation to establish a harmonious connection between humans and the spirits to be invoked. He then performs specific songs believed to have been composed by spirits through dreams and subsequently transmitted orally from one generation to the next. According to interviews with informants, it was noted that

> *"Tetapi roh tu dah bagi ke dia lagu dia, jadi dia akan bersewang lagu tu. Dia bahasa temiar juga, tapi dia bersewang tu orang kata melodinya, seni kata lagu-lagunya dia lebih kepada kedudukan seekor haiwan itu macam mana perjuangan dia, kehidupan dia dan sebagainya. Dia macam harimau yang bercerita"* (IR3)

The informants' accounts suggest that the songs conveyed by the spirits are not merely a form of entertainment but constitute a "language of the spirits," expressing narratives, aspirations, and the characteristics of natural entities, such as animals, which are regarded as possessing their own spirits. The melodies and lyrics of these songs reflect the life journeys, struggles, and roles of these beings within Temiar society, thereby serving as a means of articulating the complex spiritual relationships between humans, nature, and the spirit world. According to Marina Roseman (1991), the songs performed during *sewang* rituals function as "pathways" received from the spirits through dreams, with the *Tok Halak* acting as the living medium who renders the spirits' narratives in the form of music and dance. Thus, the songs presented in *sewang* or *Gabag Gelap* rituals are not simply entertainment but operate as a medium of spirit communication, rich in symbolism, narrative, and spiritual healing functions. They also embody the Temiar animistic worldview, which perceives all beings as sentient subjects endowed with their own stories and powers.

The Influence of Nature and Belief in the Practice of the Gabag Gelap Ritual

The influence of nature and belief is inseparable from the practice of the *Gabag Gelap* ritual among the Temiar. The close relationship between humans, the natural environment, and supernatural forces forms the fundamental basis of this ritual, in which nature is not perceived as an external entity but as part of the spirit world that sustains the community's existence. Every aspect of the ritual from the selection of time and location, to the use of natural materials and the manner of its performance is shaped by two central factors: the influence of nature and the animistic beliefs inherited across generations. Within this context, the *Gabag Gelap* ritual serves not only as a medium of healing or protection, but also as a manifestation of belief and reverence toward nature and the supernatural forces believed to reside within fauna, flora, and other natural elements. Animistic belief underpins the Temiar's interaction with the natural world in the *Gabag Gelap* ritual, wherein every aspect of nature is regarded as possessing a spirit or vital force. This perspective reflects Edward B. Tylor's (1871) assertion that animism represents a fundamental and widespread belief system in traditional societies, including among the indigenous communities of Peninsular Malaysia.

In his study, Sahar Sa'di Hashim (2020) demonstrates that *Gabag* performances are not merely ritualistic ceremonies, but rather reflect the Temiar community's mode of communication and their efforts to cultivate harmonious relationships with natural entities, including flora, fauna, and environmental phenomena. This underscores the central role of belief in natural spirits as the primary driving force behind the implementation and structure of the *Gabag Gelap* ritual. The use of natural materials and environmental settings in the ritual highlights the community's conviction in the efficacy of nature's power to support the ritual process. For instance, the *paro* the ritual stage or ceremonial hall is constructed from bamboo, specific leaves, and flowers that hold deep spiritual symbolism. Each material employed is believed to carry auspicious qualities and to serve as a medium through which spirits may be invited to provide protection (Ramle, 2001). Similarly, in the context of musical instruments, the bamboo *chantuk* is regarded as possessing a vital essence that connects the human world with the realm of spirits. Its sound is believed to summon the presence of spiritual entities such as the Tiger Spirit (*Semangat Harimau*) and the Hornbill Spirit (*Semangat Burung Enggang*) (Roseman, 1993). According to interviews with informants, it was noted that

> *"bunyian buluh itu, itulah bila kita nak bersewang, bunyi dari buluh adalah kita nak panggil roh"* (IR1)

The informants' statements highlight the role of bamboo as a vital medium in the *Gabag Gelap* ritual of the Temiar community. In Temiar tradition, the use of bamboo to produce specific sounds is not merely an aesthetic or musical element, but rather serves the purpose of calling and inviting spirits to be present during the ceremony. Bamboo is chosen for its natural qualities, its flexibility and capacity to generate a variety of sounds, from resonant echoes to repetitive rhythms, which together create an atmosphere that bridges the human and spiritual realms. According to Marina (1991), the sounds of bamboo in *sewang* rituals carry profound symbolic dimensions, functioning as a "pathway" between the human world and the supernatural. In this context, the resonance of bamboo is not simply sound, but a "language" that is understood and responded to by spirits within the animistic belief system of the Temiar.

Figure 1.5: The Researcher with the *Chantung*

Source: Fieldwork (2025)

The Temiar believe that the spirits of animals, plants, and other natural entities play an active role in their daily lives. Beyond bamboo, elements such as *daun bertam*, flowers, and other leaves serve as essential mediators between humans and the spirit world. During the ritual, flowers are not regarded merely as offerings to the spirits; rather, the Temiar believe that these floral and leafy arrangements have the capacity to attract and calm the spirits, enabling their presence within the ritual space. According to interviews with informants, it was noted that

> *"Semua daun-daun seperti daun pijat. Daun yang berbau-bau. Dia masuk penuh dalam itu. Tujuan dia adalah bila Roh Harimau itu datang, bukan datang dengan tubuh dia, tak ada. Melalui cara orang kata, apa ini, ghaiblah. Bila dia datang ke situ, dia akan isap bau-bau itu. Jadi dia akan melemahkan, melembutkan harimau."*(IR3)

This account illustrates the Temiar belief that fragrances possess spiritual power capable of calming or taming the forces of wild animal spirits. Such practices reflect the persistence of animistic beliefs among the Orang Asli, wherein every element of nature is regarded as having its own spirit and power that can interact with humans. Endicott (1979) notes that the cosmology of the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia is strongly shaped by their intimate relationship with the natural environment, where the spirits of animals, plants, and natural elements are believed to play vital roles in maintaining communal balance. In this regard, the use of *daun pijat* and other fragrant materials is not merely decorative or symbolic, but serves as an intermediary tool enabling the tiger spirit to manifest in a non-threatening form. Benjamin (1967) further emphasizes that in Temiar society, interactions with the spirit world are not necessarily framed as confrontational or dangerous, but rather as reciprocal relationships that must be carefully managed through ritual and specific taboos. Thus, the presence of the tiger spirit in the *Gabag Gelap* ritual is not intended to cause harm, but to establish a spiritual relationship under the guidance and control of the *Tok Bomoh* or *Tok Pawang*. In this process, the fragrance of selected leaves is believed to function as a "softening mechanism," transforming the nature of the spirit from aggressive to docile. The use of scent in ritual contexts is not unusual within indigenous traditions. Roseman's (1991) study of the Temiar in Ulu Perak, for instance, demonstrates how music, fragrance, and bodily

movement are often combined as channels of communication with the spirit world. Each element carries its own significance in ensuring harmony between humans and the supernatural.

The use of natural materials imbued with spiritual meaning forms the foundation of animistic belief, which constitutes the central core of *Gabag Gelap* rituals among the Temiar. Animism, as defined by Tylor (1971), is understood as a belief system in which every element of nature which is humans, animals, plants, rivers, and stones is perceived as possessing a spirit or soul capable of interacting with human beings. The practice of the *Gabag Gelap* ritual illustrates how animism is lived and expressed in the daily life of the Temiar community. According to Ain Salem et al. (2025), the *Tok Bomoh* or *Tok Halak* functions as the primary intermediary between the human and spiritual worlds. This intermediary is believed to possess the capacity to communicate with spirits through song, dance, and the ritualized use of natural materials. Findings from field interviews reveal that the *Tok Halak*, acting as the key mediator between humans and spirits, orchestrates the process of spiritual communication through prayers, chanting, and the ritual use of materials such as bamboo, *daun bertam*, and *daun pijat*. The presence of the tiger spirit, regarded as a protective entity, exemplifies how this spiritual relationship is embodied in ritual practice. According to interviews with informants, it was noted that

> *"Kita selalunya meminta perlindungan. Perlindungan kepada kehadiran haiwan-haiwan liar dan sebagainya. Contohnya haiwan liar ni maksud saya harimau, gajah dan sebagainya. Jadi bila kita bersewang dalam gelap, harimau yang berguru dengan Tok Pawang ini akan halang mana-mana harimau yang buas datang nak apa ni baham orang, nak kacau, begitu juga dengan haiwan-haiwan liar lain seperti gajah dan sebagainya."* (IR2)

This statement reinforces Endicott's (1979) observation that the cosmology of the Orang Asli is closely intertwined with the spirit world, which is believed to actively influence the fate, health, and survival of the community. In conclusion, the influence of nature and animistic belief in the *Gabag Gelap* ritual of the Temiar represents two interdependent dimensions that mutually reinforce one another, shaping a ritual practice that is both complex and deeply meaningful.

Transformasi Budaya Pengamalan Ritual Gabag Gelap

Cultural transformation is an inevitable phenomenon in all communities, including the Temiar of RPS Kuala Betis, particularly in relation to the practice of traditional rituals such as *Gabag Gelap*. Once regarded as a cornerstone of cultural heritage and a vital source of spiritual strength, the *Gabag Gelap* ritual now faces significant challenges. These challenges stem not only from external factors such as modernization, technological advancement, the influence of global culture, and the formal education system but also from internal changes, including the decline of interest and participation among younger generations in traditional practices. Traditionally, *Gabag Gelap* functioned not only as a healing ritual but also as a medium of communication between humans and the spirit world. It served to maintain both social and ecological balance while simultaneously reinforcing the collective identity of the Temiar community (Roseman, 1991). However, the pressures of development and changes in lifestyle have created a shift in values, with the ritual increasingly perceived as outdated and less relevant to contemporary life.

One of the principal factors driving this cultural transformation is the process of modernization and socio-economic development experienced by the Temiar community. The introduction of formal education, along with constant exposure to external media and cultural influences, has contributed to a shift in values and priorities among the younger generation. Formal education, in particular, has provided access to the outside world and introduced global norms and lifestyles that differ markedly from the community's traditional customs. As a result, interest among younger generations in practicing traditional rituals such as *Gabag Gelap* has steadily declined, as these practices are increasingly perceived as outdated and irrelevant within the context of modern life. This concern is further reinforced by informants' statements expressing deep anxiety over the uncertain future of their cultural heritage.

> *"sekarang pun orang asli dah ramai yang tak beminat kebudayaan kita sendiri. Mereka dah banyak pergi ke kebudayaan orang luar. Kalau kita tak diamal dan tak dijaga adat resam keturunan kita, memanglah pupus"* (IR2)

This discussion underscores the risk of the *Gabag Gelap* ritual's extinction due to the disengagement of younger generations, which in turn undermines the continuity of Temiar cultural heritage and identity. Such a phenomenon not only disrupts the traditional transmission of ritual knowledge and skills but also weakens social cohesion and communal bonds. This aligns with Clifford Geertz's (1973) assertion that the loss of traditional rituals can precipitate a crisis of identity and social integration within a community. In addition to challenges related to the attitudes and awareness of younger generations, shifts in lifestyle and patterns of migration among the Temiar further strain their relationship with the natural environment an element central to the *Gabag Gelap* ritual. As a manifestation of Temiar animistic traditions, *Gabag Gelap* is deeply dependent on close familiarity and integrated interaction with the natural world, including forests, fauna, flora, and the unseen entities believed to inhabit these spaces. Communities that once lived in proximity to their ancestral habitats are increasingly displaced as a result of development, urbanization, and government resettlement initiatives. As Endicott (1979) observed, the separation of indigenous communities from their traditional environments is a critical factor contributing to the erosion of both cultural practices and spiritual worldviews.

In addition, the traditional institutions that govern and safeguard the practice of *Gabag Gelap* are themselves facing increasingly serious challenges. The *Tok Halak*, as the principal intermediary between the human world and the spiritual realm, plays a vital role in ensuring both the continuity and effectiveness of the ritual. Within Temiar cosmology, the *Tok Halak* functions not only as the ritual leader but also as the custodian of spiritual knowledge, inherited across generations through intensive training, ritual experience, and guidance from preceding elders. At present, however, there is a noticeable shortage of skilled and knowledgeable successors in Temiar customary knowledge. The absence of systematic transmission and the declining interest among younger generations in undergoing traditional training have resulted in a deterioration of expertise among emerging *Tok Halak*. This situation poses a serious threat to the efficacy of the ritual's performance and the sustainability of the community's spiritual heritage. According to informants, it was explained that

> *"tok halak sekarang bukan macam dulu. Dah tak seoriginal dulu. Kalau tok halak tak ada, macam mana nak bersewang. Ilmu tu susah dapat"* (IR1)

The informants' statements indicate that there is a diminishing number of younger individuals capable of becoming fully qualified *Tok Halak*. This raises deep concern, as without consistent transmission, knowledge of ritual songs, prayers, natural symbols, and techniques of spiritual communication risks disappearing with the older generation. Ain Salem et al. (2025) emphasize that the *Tok Halak* is regarded as the mediator between humans and supernatural forces, believed to possess the ability to communicate directly with spirits through dreams or spiritual experiences. However, without continuity in succession, this role becomes increasingly fragile and difficult to sustain. The shortage of heirs proficient in Temiar customary knowledge also undermines the overall efficacy of the ritual. The expertise of the *Tok Halak* cannot be acquired through formal education but instead requires deep experiential learning within the community context, rituals, and spiritual interactions. Roseman (1991), in her study on Temiar music and healing, underscores that the power and effectiveness of the *Tok Halak* are highly dependent on unique knowledge acquired through "dream songs" and direct interaction with spirits. The absence of highly skilled successors not only disrupts the smooth performance of rituals but also diminishes the legitimacy of the spiritual institution within Temiar society.

This perspective is consistent with the findings of Ramle (2001), who emphasized that the transmission of traditional knowledge among the Orang Asli has been significantly disrupted by modernization and the absence of formal systems for documenting or teaching inherited wisdom. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of cultural transformation is not entirely negative. There are concerted initiatives and serious efforts by both the community and researchers to safeguard and revitalize the values and practices of *Gabag Gelap* so that they may be preserved for future generations. Documentation through academic research, audio-visual recordings, and the registration of traditional culture within heritage conservation frameworks represents some of the strategic measures currently being pursued. In addition, formalized cultural education initiatives within the community continue to be undertaken to stimulate interest among younger generations, ensuring that they remain connected to their historical roots and cultural heritage.

From a spiritual perspective, modernization has generated a profound confrontation between the Temiar's animistic belief system and the dominant religions of Islam and Christianity. Animism, as a traditional cosmological framework, has long been embedded in Temiar life, shaping their relationship with nature, ancestral spirits, and supernatural forces. Rituals such as *Gabag Gelap* are vital manifestations of this belief system, serving not only as a medium of communication with spirits but also as a social mechanism to restore communal balance, safeguard health, and reinforce collective identity. With the introduction of universalist religious traditions, however, such rituals are increasingly abandoned, as they are perceived to contradict theological principles that reject spirit veneration in Favor of exclusive devotion to a singular deity. Endicott (1979) explains that this shift in belief reflects an identity dilemma faced by the Orang Asli, who must reconcile the demands of new religions emphasizing monotheism and the rejection of animism, with the desire to preserve ancestral cultural heritage. He observes that "conversion to world religions often involves the abandonment of traditional beliefs, creating cultural dissonance." This dilemma produces psychosocial pressures that extend beyond spirituality, raising questions of identity, cultural continuity, and the legitimacy of tradition in the eyes of younger generations. According to interviews with an informant, it was noted that…

"sebab tu saya tak suka Islam masuk, kami tak boleh amalkan adat nenek moyang kami."(IR3)

This statement reflects deep concern over the reality that the spread of formal religions particularly Islam, which has become increasingly widespread among the Orang Asli, is often perceived as a major factor contributing to the erosion of ancestral traditions. The issue, however, is not one of outright rejection of religion, but rather the apprehension that the adoption of new faiths leads to the marginalization of indigenous culture, including key rituals such as *Gabag Gelap*. For the informant, Islamization is understood not only as a process of spiritual transformation but also as a threat to the survival of cultural heritage that has long served as the foundation of community life. Younger generations, in particular, tend to embrace official religious values, as these promise greater social recognition and stronger status within mainstream society. Yet this process comes at a significant cost. The neglect of animistic rituals that form the very core of the Temiar's traditional knowledge system

This confrontation is also closely tied to questions of legitimacy within spiritual institutions. The *Tok Halak*, as the intermediary between the human and spirit worlds, plays a central role in the performance of the *Gabag Gelap* ritual. However, this role has increasingly been called into question, as formal religious teachings reject any form of communication with spirits, classifying such practices as *shirik* (idolatry). As a result, the position of the *Tok Halak* has become increasingly marginalized, not only due to the lack of younger generations willing to inherit this knowledge, but also because formal religious institutions have assumed the primary spiritual functions within the community.

The implications of this confrontation are complex. Socially, it has led to polarization between those who continue to defend animistic rituals and those who fully embrace formal religion. Such polarization can generate identity conflicts within the community, as it involves two distinct and often contradictory cosmological frameworks. The abandonment of these rituals affects not only the spiritual dimension but also the wider social and ecological networks that are intrinsically linked to them.

In sum, the cultural transformations and challenges surrounding the practice of *Gabag Gelap* in the modern era represent a complex and multidimensional reality for the Temiar community of RPS Kuala Betis. These dynamics are shaped by external factors such as modernization, formal education, mobility, and exposure to imported cultural aesthetics, as well as internal factors including the erosion of traditional knowledge and lifestyle changes that weaken connections with the natural environment. Nevertheless, through initiatives in cultural preservation, heritage education, and the careful adaptation of rituals, there remains hope that this significant tradition can be sustained and transmitted to future generations. The community's awareness of and appreciation for the intrinsic values of *Gabag Gelap* will be the decisive factor in ensuring the continuity of this cultural heritage and the spiritual resilience of the Temiar people in the face of contemporary challenges.

CONCLUSION

The *Gabag Gelap* ritual among the Temiar is not merely a form of traditional performance art, but functions as a spiritual, social, and cultural medium that expresses the community's profound relationship with spirits, humanity, and the natural environment. It serves multiple purposes, including acting as a protective mechanism against threats from wild animals, a medium for healing illnesses, and a means of maintaining the cosmological balance central to Temiar belief. Through the role of the *Tok Halak* as a spiritual intermediary, the ritual embodies a distinctive epistemology grounded in song, bamboo music, floral fragrances, and dreams as channels of communication with the spirit world. However, the continuity of this practice faces significant challenges due to the influence of modern education, external religions, and lifestyle changes, resulting in a decline in the frequency of its performance and a tendency towards adapted rather than original forms. This reality highlights that the Temiar's intangible cultural heritage stands at a critical juncture, necessitating serious efforts to document, interpret, and safeguard the values embedded within it.

The significance of this study lies in its effort to document and examine the *Gabag Gelap* ritual as an intangible cultural heritage that, while at risk of extinction, is deeply embedded with epistemological value, identity, and the philosophical worldview of the Temiar community. This research contributes to the enrichment of anthropological knowledge, particularly within the ethnographic study of the Orang Asli, by demonstrating how ritual traditions serve as spaces of interaction between belief systems, artistic expression, and social structures. From a practical perspective, the findings of this study may serve as an important reference for the formulation of cultural preservation policies, whether through community-based education, cultural awareness programmes, or formal recognition within the framework of national heritage. At the same time, this study emphasizes that *Gabag Gelap* should be understood as a dynamic tradition capable of adapting to contemporary change, without losing its core values as a medium for strengthening identity, social solidarity, and spiritual balance within the Temiar community. Through sustained preservation, documentation, and the integration of this ritual within broader frameworks of Orang Asli development, this study contributes not only to the cultural sustainability of the Temiar but also offers significant insights into academic discourse on indigenous strategies of adaptation in the face of modernization pressures.

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