

## TRADITIONAL MEDICATION-RAJAH: THE RATIONAL CHOICE OF ACEH PEOPLE FOR RECOVERING DISEASES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explain the reasons of Aceh people's choice for nonmedical treatment - rajah during the Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative approach was used to address the research problem. The findings showed that people chose nonmedical treatment with Rajah reading prayers and verses of the al-Quran then blowing on them and the water they brought to be drunk at their homes. They chose this treatment method by considering some rational reasons. Among the most prominent reasons; they were afraid to go to the government's public health service center for fear of being tested for antigens first and being judged to be positive for Covid-19, so they were quarantined and isolated from the community, both themselves and their families. In addition, Rajah was considered effective in curing diseases that resemble the symptoms of Covid-19, such as fever, flu, and cough. Even so, this study explains beyond the two reasons that are categorized as instrumental rational choices to achieve the goal – recovering from illness and avoiding threats of isolation. This study confirms that Aceh people put avoiding social isolation as the main rational choice in determining social action.

Keywords : Rajah; Disease; Covid-19; Recover; Health.

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan alasan pilihan masyarakat Aceh untuk berobat secara nonmedis – rajah di masa pandemi Covid-19. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan untuk menjawab masalah penelitian. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat memilih pengobatan nonmedis dengan membaca doa Rajah dan ayat-ayat al-Quran kemudian ditiupkan ke atas mereka dan air yang dibawanya untuk diminum di rumah masing-masing. Mereka memilih metode pengobatan ini dengan mempertimbangkan beberapa alasan yang rasional. Di antara alasan yang paling menonjol; mereka takut ke pusat pelayanan kesehatan masyarakat pemerintah karena takut dites antigen terlebih dahulu dan dinilai positif Covid-19, sehingga mereka dikarantina dan diisolasi dari masyarakat, baik diri sendiri maupun keluarganya. Selain itu, Rajah dinilai efektif menyembuhkan penyakit yang menyerupai gejala Covid-19, seperti demam, flu, dan batuk. Meski begitu, penelitian ini menjelaskan di luar dua alasan yang dikategorikan sebagai pilihan rasional instrumental untuk mencapai tujuan – pulih dari penyakit dan menghindari ancaman isolasi. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa masyarakat Aceh menempatkan menghindari isolasi sosial sebagai pilihan rasional utama dalam menentukan tindakan sosial.

Keywords: Raja; Penyakit; Covid19; Pulih; Kesehatan.

## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused the global world to feel tense and panicked. People experience acute fear of death caused by the virus (Adrian et al., 2022; Gusty et al., 2020; Simon et al., 2021). Coupled with the fear of physically breaking up social relations if they are judged to be affected by the virus because health institutions treat patients who are considered to have covid by quarantining and isolating both the living and the dead (Rusman et al., 2021; Simanullang & Situmorang, 2020; Villa Rohmatur & Setiawan, 2021). As a result, people's social interactions change completely in all aspects of life. Social distancing and lockdown are forms of interaction that are highly encouraged in various countries, including Indonesia to avoid and prevent the spread of the virus (Bere, 2022; Putri et al., 2020; Singh & Singh, 2020). However, this social interaction did not last long in Aceh, so there were not much changes in social and economic relations during Covid-19 (Syahputra et al., 2020). Therefore, coffee shops, markets, and places of worship are still full of Acehnese people even though they understand very well the physical distancing to prevent the transmission of Covid (Zulfikar & Auliansyah, 2020). Meanwhile, hospitals and health care centers are no longer people's first choice when they are sick, even though the cost of treatment is free. They seek alternative treatment, both medical treatment and nonmedical treatment. This study focuses on people's choice of nonmedical treatment - *rajah*.

*Rajah* is a method of healing of Aceh nonmedical traditional medication by reciting a prayer and blowing to the sick and water to drink. The prayers that are recited are derived from the verses of the Quran. The diseases usually cured by this method are abdominal pain, headaches, and fever (Rizki, 2018; Rostina et al., 2020; Yulianingsih, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, although the Aceh people were served free treatment at the government health service center, some are reluctant to visit a public health center (Puskesmas) or hospital. They preferred to obtain health services by paying a certain amount of money when they were sick. One way is *rajah* by the expert healer, called *Teungku Meubat*. People are generally afraid of being infected with Covid-19 or being diagnosed with COVID-19 because this virus can attack anyone, whether its babies, children, or adults. A person is easily exposed to Covid-19; one cause is the body's immune system has decreased drastically, making it easier for the virus to roam into the body. Among the symptoms of someone infected with Covid-19 are experiencing flu, sore throat, headache, high fever, coughing up phlegm and even bleeding, shortness of breath, and chest pain. These symptoms appear when the body reacts to Covid-19 (Fajar et al., 2020).

This had influenced people's choices in obtaining treatment for their illness. Some people were reluctant to seek treatment at the Public Health Centre (Puskesmas), and prefer nonmedical treatment. There were even people who chose to lie down at home without being taken to the Puskesmas or a hospital. This fact was found in Tambon Tunong Village, people who experienced illnesses resembling the corona virus such as fever, cough, sore throat, flu, headache, and others did not visit the Puskesmas to have a treatment (Observation, 5 December 2020). Accordingly, during Covid Pandemic, the number of patients decreased drastically. A Health Officer at the Dewantara District Health Center, Mrs. Erna Muryani, explained that "During the COVID-19 pandemic there was a decrease in the number of patients than before Covid-19. Before Covid-19, in 2019, the number of patients at the District Health Centre was 2.907 to 3.056 every month. Meanwhile, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant decline, for example, in 2021; the number of patients was 807 to 1356. It was estimated that an almost 65% decrease in patients (Interview, 2, November 2021)".

Many studies on Covid-19 have been carried out by various experts with various perspectives, from health, politics, and economics to socio-cultural. However, sociological studies are still considered minimal, especially from the perspective of sociological health. Among the sociological studies; the risk of Covid as a result of anthropogenic behavior (Suharko, 2022), public perception of Covid-19 (Jubba et al., 2021), government language production in communicating Covid-19 to the community (Junaidi & Haryadi, 2021), learning strategies (Astutik et al., 2022; Seedat-Khan & Ramnund-Mansingh, 2022), and economic burdens and strategy (Hidayati et al., 2022; Seedat-Khan et al., 2022), policies for handling Covid (Daher-Nashif, 2022; Hidayati et al., 2022; Marseliana, 2022), and community compliance with Covid protocols (Hanandini & Pramono, 2022; Roach Anleu & Sarantoulas, 2022), the role of religion in preventing Covid (Najoan, 2022). These studies do not look at people's choices in obtaining treatment for diseases suffered during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. The data were collected by observation, in-depth interview, and documentation, and then analyzed following Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The results show that some people who choose nonmedical treatment – *raja* were determined by instrumental reasons, orientation, traditional reasons, and environmental reasons. However, the study found that their instrumental reasons do not prioritize the economic aspect as the main reason. Besides, the study confirms that instrumental choice not only gains goals but also avoids a person from threats that eliminate the fulfillment of basic needs – social interaction.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research occurred in Tambon Tunong Village, Dewantara District, North Aceh Regency, Indonesia. The study used a qualitative research method with a case study approach. The qualitative method seeks to explain 'how' and 'why' a particular social phenomenon operates in a particular context. Thus, researchers understand the social world and why things are the way they are (Mohajan, 2018). This study aimed to obtain a comprehensive picture of the reasons that encourage some people in Tambon Tunong Village to choose to medication method by the nonmedical way – *raja*. Data were collected by observation, interview, and document studies. Data was analyzed by following the Miles and Huberman's interactive model (Miles et al., 2018), which suggests that activities in the qualitative analysis are carried out interactively and occur continuously until complete, and data is saturated (Miles et al., 2018; Rachman et al., 2019). The activities of data analysis occurred during collecting and after going out in the field, such as follows data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification (Lune & Berg, 2017).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Health is closely related to healthy behaviors, supports health, and tends to endanger health. Rosmalia and Sriani (2017) state that health behavior is all forms of experiences and interactions of individuals with their environment, especially regarding knowledge & attitudes about health and their actions related to health & disease. Health behavior influences the number of visitors to a health care center. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Aceh people prefer to be treated by nonmedical treatment for the illness they suffered from. Thus, the number of patients treated with Puskesmas decreased. It is similar to Pangoempia et al. (2021)) who state that the number of patients decreased at Public Health Centers, and the number of patients treated by nonmedical experts increased.

Table 1. The Number of Patients Data at Dewantara Public Health Center

No	Month	Number of Patients Treated /Years		
		2019	2020	2021
1	January	3.056	1.710	807
2	February	2.638	1.467	910
3	March	2.816	1.276	651
4	April	2.739	1.541	789
5	May	2.344	1.316	978
6	June	2.429	1.515	871
7	July	2.931	1.289	745
8	August	2.306	1.680	902
9	September	2.644	1.712	867
10	October	2.856	1.651	941
11	November	2.907	1.567	765
12	December	2.368	1.487	723

The data was modified from the Document of Dewantara District Public Health Center (2021)

Aceh People received nonmedical treatment by mantra/prayer recited by an expert (known as Teungku). The number of patients has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, at the Teungku Wan site, before Covid-19, only 5 to 7 people seek treatment a day, but since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people seeking treatment has increased, with 15 to 20 people received his treatment a day. By 2021, the number of patients was as follows:

Tabel 2. The Number of Patients treated by Mantra/Prayer in 2021

No	Month	Number of Patients 2021
1	January	356
2	February	315
3	March	387
4	April	375
5	May	415
6	June	386
7	Jully	398
8	August	437
9	September	402
10	October	390
11	November	378
12	December	365

The data was modified from the Document of Teungku Wan (2021)

Based on the observations, the people suffering from illness were treated by reading prayers to the sick and bottled water that would be consumed at home. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, many people seek this treatment if they have symptoms of fever, flu, and other illnesses that resemble COVID-19 symptoms. The patients consisted of infants to adults. People who want to seek treatment only need to bring water and money as a form of alms without a benchmark for the amount of money (Observation, 27, November 2021).

The fact was supported by the village leader, Mr. Murdani explained, "Rajah is another alternative that was used by the community for treatment. They saw the fact that many patients recovered because of the rajah (prayer) by Teungku Wan. The most rajah was done on patients with fever and cough. Teungku Wan recited a prayer to the patients and water which would be drunk. In terms of costs, the patients paid sincerely (Interview, 4, December 2021)".

However, if the illness was not cured by the rajah, people visited the Puskesmas or Hospital to be treated. Mr. Zulkarnain, a villager in Gampong Tambon Tunong, revealed that:

"Rajah has become a way of treating illness because it has a positive impact on curing illness. That is why people believe more in treatment with rajah because it can cure illnesses that are not only caused by viruses, such as the corona virus. It can also be caused by a demonic disorder, which we usually call *meurampot*, and cure magic/devil. Therefore before going to the hospital, firstly people seek rajah treatment to determine whether the disease is caused by environmental conditions or it due to interference from Satan or magic. If you recover with Rajah, we do not need to go to the hospital (Interview, December 8, 2021)".

In addition, another villager explained a similar thing, Mrs. Maryana explained that "During the corona virus, I did not dare to seek treatment at the Puskesmas or hospitals, worried that I would be exposed to the corona virus and could be quarantined. If there are symptoms of illness such as flu, fever, cough, diarrheas, and others, choose to seek treatment at Teungku Wan only. He treated it with rajah on water and was also given advice such as using red onion mixed with coconut oil and smearing it on the body. Also drink plenty of water, especially young coconut water. Alhamdulillah, the advice was able to treat my fever (Interview, December 8, 2021)".

Similar to the above statement, another villager, Mr. Asnawi also explained that "Now if I have a fever or flu, I chose to go to Teungku Wan for getting treatment. I saw those who seek treatment for illness have recovered from fever and flu. Teungku Wan recited a mantra/prayer with me and water. The prayer consisted of a verse from the al-Quran. Later, I drank the Rajah water, and once treated, my illness was cured. Therefore if there is such a disease, choose treatment in the village. If you did not dare to go to the health center or hospital because you were worried about being tested for the rapid antigen, and being positive for Covid, thus being quarantined. The treatment with rajah also could recover the sick people without having to go to the Puskesmas (Interview, December 13, 2021)".

Based on the results, Aceh people in Tambon Tunong Village who experienced illnesses resembling the corona virus such as flu, fever, cough, diarrhea, and other illness, chose nonmedical treatment at the Teungku Wan site for rajah treatment. They have some reasons for doing so; they do not dare to seek treatment at the Puskesmas or Hospital because they are worried about being exposed to the corona virus, they experience recovering from illness by the rajah, the rajah/prayer recited is derived from some verses of al-Quran, the cost of rajah is relative based on the patient's economic ability and sincerity and patients are suggested to consume halal herbal for treating pain, for instance, fever can be treated by applying a mixture of shallots and coconut oil to the body and drinking lots of water and young coconut water.

Such a choice of health behavior can be interpreted that the Aceh people who are left in the village behave in health based on rational choices to achieve the goal, namely, recovering from the disease they are experiencing, and this choice is considered an effective instrument and following the religious values and norms adopted. Coupled with the rationality of the costs incurred can be adjusted to their economic ability. It confirms that individual actions related to

target and confirmation of norms (Coleman, 1994), and these findings are also relevant to some rational concepts of Weber and Boudon which Aceh people choose to be treated by rajah because it is an effective means for recovering and not breaking norms and values (Demeulenaere, 2014), and reading verses of al-Quran is trusted can be a medicine for recovering or healing pain (Ansari et al., 2022; Deuraseh, 2009; Priyanto et al., 2020; Qader et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2021). In addition, suggestions to consume shallots and coconuts are categorized as an environmental and herbal determinant (Owumi, 2013) encouraging Aceh people to choose rajah as a way of recovering during the Covid Pandemic.

However, this finding is slightly different from the sociologist, revealing that a person's choice of action toward one thing, at the same time he leaves the other's choice of action. Therefore, in his choice, a person not only achieves the main goal but also avoids a threat due to the choice of action. The people of Aceh choose nonmedical treatment – Rajah not only achieves the goal of being able to recover and become healthy but also can avoid the threat of being judged to be positive for Covid-19 which results in being quarantined and isolated from the environmental community, both themselves and their families. Furthermore, it can be interpreted that people's fear of being isolated and not being able to relate to other people is a threat to the fulfillment of one's needs – social interaction. This means that social interaction is not just a process and form of social relations but also the needs of each individual.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Aceh people in Gampong Tambon Tunong chose nonmedical treatment with rajah and consumption of herbal concoctions for the treatment of disease symptoms to resemble the corona virus and other diseases. This was done because of the fear of being judged to be positive for COVID when an antigen was carried out as an initial procedure in the first stage of treatment for various diseases during a pandemic by the rajah they experienced recovering from disease, and this treatment confirms the norms and values. Furthermore, their fear of being isolated can be interpreted as social relations, which is not just a process of social interaction but also the basic needs of humans as social beings. These findings confirm that people's rational choices prioritize avoiding social isolation and obtaining health rather than economic rational choices. The finding also improves the previous concepts of rational choice which put forward the economic aspect as the main reason for individuals and society in determining social actions.

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## **Data availability**

The data supporting the results of the study are available within the manuscript.

## **Conflict of interest**

The author declares that I have no conflicts of interest.

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