

Ilham Alam: Nature and Healing in the Malay World

By Suhaili Osman

The earliest medicines made by humans were derived from the compounds of plants and animal parts. In spite of the advances that modern biomedicines have made, many communities around the world continue to rely on the traditional medical practices of their respective cultures. Herbal remedies are lauded for their perceived 'holistic' healing benefits, accessibility and affordability. In that respect, *Ilham Alam: Nature and Healing in the Malay World*, which opened at the Malay Heritage Centre on 18 September, examines how nature inspired the myriad ways in which various historical Malay communities harnessed the bounty of flora and fauna to promote health and effect healing.

Spread over two galleries and an outdoor courtyard, *Ilham Alam* discusses traditional Malay medicine in the larger context of ethno-medical traditions.

Earlier ethno-medical traditions such as traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda, have been undergoing a revival and are being promoted as more 'natural' complements to modern biomedicines. Globally, there is also increased interest in the role that botanicals play in curing various human ailments. Gallery One depicts how from early on, Malays associated the human body's well-being as a reflection of its relationship with the natural environment.

Gallery One's artefacts aim to show how the corpus of traditional Malay medicines developed over time and drew influences from various medical traditions that accompanied the movement of maritime trade and religions across the Southeast Asian region. At the fundamental level, the Malay approach to health is that the human body is closely entwined with its external environment and that there is a *semangat* or life force that pervades all creation. Spirit offerings crafted by the Mah Meri of Selangor (an *Orang Asli* tribe of the Malay Peninsula), demonstrate the community's intimate links with their forest surroundings while the use of ritualised performances like the Kelantanese *main peteri* (to heal psychological ailments) is represented by the fiddle-like *rebab* and *gendang gayong* (hand drum). The similarities and differences among Malay, Yunani (Graeco-Islamic), Ayurveda and Chinese ethno-medical systems are presented in a 3D projection created in collaboration with students from Nanyang Polytechnic's School of Interactive and Digital Media (SIDM).

The impact of global phenomena on developments in the Malay world, namely Islam since the 12th century and European colonialism from the 16th to 19th centuries, is represented by artefacts such as an 18th century handwritten Qur'an from Solo, a Bugis Islamic charm and herbarium specimens specially prepared by the Singapore Botanic Gardens.



Gallery One, The Body in Nature: Health and Healing in the Malay World, some artefacts which are often used in traditional Malay medicine

Gallery Two looks at traditional Malay medicine from the community level. Three Malay health practitioners are featured, along with a discussion of their socio-cultural significance in Malay society. Artefacts such as the National Library of Malaysia's *Kitab Tibb* manuscripts contain traditional medicinal and esoteric knowledge or *ilmu*, which is passed down from one generation of healers to the next. Artefacts associated with the *Mak Bidan* (village midwife), *Tok Mudin* (an elder who performs male ritual circumcision) and *Tukang Urut* (traditional masseuse) are displayed alongside photographs and oral histories provided by former practitioners and Malays who have experienced life milestones under these practitioners' watchful eyes – events such as pregnancy and birth and a boy's coming-of-age. Another SIDM multimedia projection presents a playful interpretation of the changes in Malay society over time. Visitors will see several objects associated with *jamu*, herbal remedies used since the times of the ancient Javanese kingdoms. An installation in the form of a traditional medicine shop pays homage to the many commercial and popular traditional remedies that Singaporeans grew up with – a shared memory across generations and ethnic backgrounds.

A very special feature of *Ilham Alam* is an outdoor maze filled with live plants and curated to echo the Singapore Botanic Gardens' *Healing Garden*. Designed with young children and families in mind, the maze introduces the importance of spices as an early global trading commodity and also how the various plants are used by the Malays

as natural remedies for a variety of bodily ailments and to promote general health. Visitors are encouraged to move around the maze to discover more about the healing powers of plants and engage their olfactory senses with 'smell-stations' containing popular spices used in both food and medicine.

The *Ilham Alam: Nature and Healing in the Malay World* special exhibition runs from 18 September 2013 – 5 January 2014 at the Malay Heritage Centre in Kampong Gelam. Visitors are also encouraged to participate in a series of fun and informative programmes in support of *Ilham Alam*, including academic lectures, a film screening, traditional Malay post-natal massage and *ulam* (salad)-making workshops.



Gallery Two, Fading into the Forest: The Art and Practice of Traditional Malay Medicine, traditional Malay medicine practitioners and the tools of their respective trades take centre stage while oral history audio clips hark back to the time when these practitioners played significant roles in Malay quotidian and cultural life

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All photos courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre