Traditional Medicine Practices Using Arabic Symbols

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the forms and characteristics of Arabic written symbols used in traditional medicine. Traditional medicine is in demand by the public, because of the perceived high cure rate and the failure of modern treatment that patients have undergone after undergoing medical treatment. Traditional medicine is more convincing than medical treatment. There has not been much research regarding the characteristics and methods of traditional medicine using Arabic symbols/writing. Arabic symbols or writing have been researched more in terms of meaning and ritual. Hence, this research utilized data source triangulation and technical triangulation. This qualitative research adopted a phenomenological approach. The research subjects were traditional medicine practitioners who used Arabic symbols/writing in their treatments and patients who had used traditional medicine. Determining the subjects of this research was carried out using a purposive sampling technique. The research results showed that prayers originating from the Qur'an and rajah with Arabic letter symbols were the therapist's mainstay medicine for treating patients. The use of prayers and rajahs with Arabic letter symbols varied from one therapist to another. Rajah in traditional medicine was used to treat various kinds of patient complaints. The rajah writing came from the books of Shams al Ma'arif al Kubra and Al Mujarrabat. Rajah came from verses from the Qur'an which were rewritten in
the book of medicine. Proper interpretation and use of the Qur'an could provide effective improvements to a person's weak mental and psychological condition.

**Keywords:** Arabic script; traditional medicine; social anthropology; health; rajah.

**Introduction**

Indonesian people make extensive use of ancient scripts and Arabic symbols/writing for various purposes. The cultural heritage of ancient society in the form of written symbols, as well as self-identity and a manifestation of the high intellectuality of society at that time, is called ancient script\(^1\). This ancient script is also found on amulets or rajah.

Amulets or rajah are also found in various forms, inscribed with Arabic letters, verses from the Quran, as well as special Arabic symbols written in certain media. Arabic writing, including verses from the Qur'an, apart from being related to prayer and worship, is also used for various purposes which are full of the noble values of Islamic teachings. The Qur'an has the characteristics of being selective in using sentence editing, language style, and vocabulary. This uniqueness caused the Arab people, at the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an, to be stunned when they heard the verses of the Qur'an. They feel that the language of the Qur'an surpasses the popular language style in their daily speech and exceeds the beauty of the poetry style that they have inherited from generation to generation\(^2\). The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic. Every person who uses his mind is motivated to understand God's messages in the Qur'an. All diction and sentence structures in the Qur'an display uniqueness and beauty. The Arabs themselves also recognized and greatly admired the beauty of the Qur'an. They used the Qur'an as a new Arabic scientific reference in addition to the entrenched oral tradition\(^3\).

The Qur'an was understood by Indonesian people because of the arrival of the Arabs. Arabs came to Indonesia around the 12th and 14th centuries AD, introducing Arabic writing to make it easier to read the Qur'an and spread Islam.

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in the archipelago. Arabic writing was then used to write Malay literature and people knew it as Arabic Pegon.

Arabic Pegon is not only limited to Malay or Javanese but is commonly found in other areas. Islamic culture is a marker of the presence of Arabic Pegon in the Indonesian archipelago. Arabic Pegon was used by ancient ulama as an effort to spread Islam. The use of Arabic Pegon in schools and Islamic boarding schools is deeply rooted in the culture of the local community and is still maintained today. Madrasas and Islamic boarding schools are still considered very successful in producing graduates who understand Arabic Pegon. Arabic pegon can also be found in Rajah or medical books.

Rajah is considered to have magical powers because it was made by someone who had wisdom. Rajah is also used as a medium for traditional medicine, and for various other functions, for example for grooming, rajah for love, personal protection, rajah for house fences and immunity. Arabic writing and verses from the Al-Quran used in traditional medicine are not foreign to society. Prayers for healing based on the Al-Quran from kyai are often requested by people who come for treatment. Traditional medicines in the form of medicinal plant concoctions, dietary practices, mental health practices, spiritual healing and therapy are heavily influenced by Islam. These traditional medicines reflect the timeless interconnection between Islamic medicines, prophetic influences, and traditional medicines that emerged from specific geographic and cultural origins.

Traditional medicine is a holistic practice, based on beliefs and experiences from various cultures, whether explainable or not, in the context of

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health maintenance, prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illnesses. Traditional healing practices extend beyond the realm of health to broader societal, religious, and cultural levels\(^\text{11,12}\). Each society develops a system of medicine that has different styles and characteristics. Conditions in Indonesia in general, traditional healers tend to be more spread out in rural areas, and modern healers tend to be found more often in urban areas\(^\text{13,14}\). Nowadays, the use of traditional medicine is often found because traditional medicine is part of tradition, easy, cheap, and effective. Traditional medicine is also used as a first aid measure when experiencing illness\(^\text{15,16}\). The treatment most sought after by the public is treatment that has a high cure rate which is proven after the patient undergoes the treatment. Traditional medicine is in demand by the public, because of the perceived high cure rate and the failure of modern treatment that patients have undergone after undergoing medical treatment. This has given rise to new views and a strong belief that traditional medicine is more convincing than medical treatment\(^\text{17,18,19}\). There has not been much research regarding the characteristics and methods of traditional medicine using Arabic symbols/writing. Arabic symbols or writing have been researched more in terms of meaning and ritual\(^\text{20,21,22}\). This article discusses the forms of Arabic written symbols which are used as traditional medicine.

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15 Triratnawati, “Pengobatan Tradisional, Upaya Meminimalkan Biaya Kesehatan Masyarakat Desa Di Jawa.”


Previous and current research found related to (a) traditional medicine that uses plant-based medicine, mantras, or other media as an alternative to modern health industry practices\(^\text{23}\), (b) healing based on the Al-Quran through sound and the psychological effects it causes\(^\text{24,25}\), (c) the tradition of *rajah* in Javanese tribal beliefs\(^\text{26}\), and (d) Al-Quran verses in psychic practice among Javanese society, by *santri* or *kyai*, who have normative arguments and theological legitimacy from the Al-Quran\(^\text{27}\). Based on previous research, this article makes a different contribution that has not been discussed much before. This research seeks to reveal the form of Arabic symbols/writing that has been used in traditional medicine and has become a therapeutic tool to support patient recovery and can become an integral part of modern medicine. This article contributes to providing a classification of the characteristics of tattoos with Arabic writing that are used in traditional medicine. The theory used is related to the semiotic triangle of Ogden and Richards. In the diagram, the semiotic triangle has a dotted line between the symbol (word) and the reference (object). This shows that symbols and references (objects) do not have an absolute relationship\(^\text{28}\).

This research is qualitative research using a phenomenological research approach. The phenomenological approach aims to explain phenomena in their purity, seeking to reveal and understand the reality of research based on the perspective of the research subject. The phenomenological approach examines society describing its everyday world, especially how individuals with their consciousness construct meaning from the results of interactions with other


\(^{23}\) Syaiful, Hakim, and Hak, “Healing from Healer: Use of Traditional Health Services in the Age of Modern Health.”

\(^{24}\) Hechehouche, Dzulkifli, and Alias, “The Quranic-Based Healing through Sound and Its Psychological Effect.”


individuals\textsuperscript{29,30}. The research subjects were (1) therapists and traditional medicine practitioners in general, (2) therapists and traditional medicine practitioners who used Arabic symbols or symbols in their treatment, and (3) patients who had used traditional medicine. Determining the research subjects was carried out using a purposive sampling technique, so that the selected research subjects were in accordance with the research focus.

Literature study technique, through searching written documents (either reference books or scientific journals resulting from research) to gather information about Arabic script symbols used in traditional medicine and all their ins and outs. Documentation techniques, through photo and video documentation, aimed to collect information about Arabic written symbols used in traditional medicine. Observation techniques were used by looking directly at traditional medicine that used Arabic symbols. In-depth interview techniques and distribution of questionnaires were carried out with research subjects, with the questions given being the same as the questionnaire. The questionnaire was created using a combination of open and closed question models, for the entire group of research subjects. In this research, we utilized triangulation of data sources and triangulation of methods/techniques. Source triangulation was carried out by cross checking research subject data from groups of therapists and traditional medicine practitioners in general, therapists and traditional medicine practitioners who used Arabic symbols in their treatment, and patients. Method/technique triangulation was carried out by utilizing library study techniques, documentation techniques, observation, distribution of questionnaires, and in-depth interviews to collect research data.

Findings and Discussion

\textit{Rajab} is Arabic writing containing verses from the Al-Quran, prayer readings, names of Allah, \textit{sholawat} or certain Arabic letters written by a spiritual practitioner to treat physical or psychological illnesses and to provide spiritual protection to the person who wears it. \textit{Rajab} can be written on various media such as paper, cloth, plates, or other solid objects. \textit{Rajab} can also be written on the body of people who have complaints of illness using certain oils such as za'faran or misk. Even though \textit{rajabs} come from verses from the Al-Quran, hadith, or Arabic books, not everyone can write \textit{rajab} that have medicinal benefits. A spiritual practitioner who writes it must go through various mental


and spiritual practices such as fasting, reciting several *dhikrs* with certain numbers for a specified time\textsuperscript{31}.

**Characteristics and media for writing rajahs**

Therapists use the book *Shams al Ma'arif al Kubra* as the main reference for writing *rajah*. The book was written by Ahmad Ali Al Buni, a scholar from Al Jazair. The book contains a guide to writing *rajah* which comes from verses from the Al-Quran because according to the author and many other scholars, the Al-Quran has the function of healing various diseases and eliminating various disorders. This book is studied in many traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. Most spiritual practitioners who practice rajah medicine have studied this book in Islamic boarding schools\textsuperscript{32}. As an amulet, *rajahs* are often written on handkerchiefs, clothes, vests, and belts. Some are also written on weapons such as knives, spears, swords, daggers, bamboo, wooden sticks, or animal bones\textsuperscript{33}.

*Rajah* made from animal skin is a *rajah* with Arabic writing, written on goat skin or deer skin. This *rajah* is usually kept in a belt or wallet. This *rajah* is used by people for safety and self-protection when traveling long distances because when traveling, what things will be encountered or experienced, you can never predict that you will experience a certain incident. Through this *rajah*, the owner believes that God will always be and give safety. *Rajah* made from animal skin is also believed to bring good luck\textsuperscript{34}.

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\textsuperscript{34} Pamungkas, Noupal, and Fitriyana, “Tradisi ‘Rajah’: Terapi Mistik Dalam Kepercayaan Masyarakat Suku Jawa Di Kabupaten Ogan Komering Ulu Timur.”
Apart from being pieces of verses from the Al-Quran and the names of Allah, rajahs also have various shapes and patterns. A numerical pattern diagram contains a table of Arabic numbers. An alphabetic diagram contains the arrangement of Arabic letters. A pictorial diagram contains images with certain patterns.

Ahmad Ali Al Buni in the book Shams al Ma'arif al Kubra provided an explanation of *rajab* with numerical patterns. طَيِّبٌ for طَيِّبٌ means the perceptible. شهيد for شهيد means the all-and-ever witnessing, خبير for خبير means the most aware. فرد for فرد means the one. جبار for جبار means the compeller. ثابت for ثابت means the solid, زي for زي means the pure.

While *rajab* with numerical diagram pattern, each number represents a letter which is believed to have magical powers and can be used for various purposes such as protecting from mystical things.

![Numerical pattern diagram](image)

Figure 3. Numerical pattern diagram

![Pictorial diagram](image)

Figure 4. Pictorial diagram

This symbol (figure 4) is believed to originate from the Hebrew alphabet used to write the Torah and Bible. This Rajah is used to provide protection for assets such as a house, garden, or place where treasure is stored.
The rajah in figure 5 gives the meaning that surely those who believe and do good, their Lord will guide them ‘to Paradise’ through their faith, rivers will flow under their feet in the Gardens of Bliss: Yunus verse 9. The verse is written on the rajah because it is believed that it can give power, grace, and love from others to whom uses this rajah.

In the past and present, if a person is unable to fight emotional, physical, and psychological discomfort in its various aspects (illness, sadness, any kind of difficulty), that person may very well try to eliminate or neutralize the discomfort he feels with plants, words, signs, and objects that are considered to have supernatural powers. The use of amulets and rajah by traditional medicine practitioners is very normal and people believe that the efforts made by traditional medicine practitioners can protect them from danger, bring good luck, or ward off evil spirits36.

The use of rajahs in traditional medicine

The Andersen and Newman health seeking Behavioral Model includes (1) predisposing factors, namely the patient's socio-cultural conditions which describe their health condition, (2) supporting factors needed to obtain services in the form of facilities or logistics, and (3) factors requiring the use of health services as a direct cause of health care choices and reflects an individual's perceived health status37.

Religious practices, traditional beliefs and culture used in healing various diseases are still the choice of people in Indonesia. The selection of a patient for health services, in this case a traditional medical therapist, in a medically plural society is a complex process. This depends on various factors, such as the severity of the disease, the patient's perceived risk of the disease, relative proximity to traditional medicine therapists, cost of health services, transportation facilities, gender of the patient, attitude of the patient towards different treatment systems, past experiences of the patient, the patient's perception of the disease, and the belief system regarding the causes of the emergence of a disease. In Indonesian society, religious figures are considered to have privileges apart from religious knowledge. They are considered to have the ability to treat illnesses, both medical and non-medical, with prayers or certain methods. The suggestions of people who seek treatment from religious figures are so strong that many feel the positive impact of the treatment. This is the predisposing factor that makes people choose rajah treatment.

Rajah using verses from the Quran is used by many alternative medicine practitioners. It is believed that the Quran is not only a holy book and a guide to life for Muslims, but also has healing properties. The Qur'an is a source of healing and treatment for all physical and mental illnesses. Many verses of the Qur'an reveal the treatment of physical and mental illnesses and mental health. Based on an interview with one of the therapists, KH. Farihin from Jatibarang, Brebes Regency, he uses tattoos from Al-Quran verses for medical practice. The verses used are seven greeting verses, namely Surah Yasin verse 58, Ash-Shaffat verse 79, Ash-Shaffat verse 109, Ash-Shaffat verse 1, Ash-Shaffaat verse 130, Al-Qadr verse 5, Ash-Shaffat verses 181-182. The verses are written on a piece of paper and put in a jug of water then left for a day and night, after which the patient drinks it. Respondents who are patients of KH. Farihin are Mr. Musofiyuddin who suffered a mild stroke which made him often forgetful and his head often dizzy. After two months of drinking the water soaked in the verse, his condition gradually improved, and he no longer forgot and felt dizzy.

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40 Hechehouche, Dzulkifli, and Alias, “The Quranic-Based Healing through Sound and Its Psychological Effect.”
Although predisposing factors are the main determinants of people choosing certain health services, enabling components must also be considered as determining factors. The condition where a health service is chosen by the community because there is a need to meet the need for treatment is called an enabling factor. Enabling factors which include economic conditions and ease of access to health services greatly influence people's behavior in seeking treatment. Enabling conditions can be measured by family income, or the presence or absence of health insurance and access to health services.

Many people choose rajab treatment because practitioners never charge a fee. Patients who come for treatment can give whatever money they can. Mbah Temu's treatment in Sidoluhur Village, Jaken District, Pati Regency, never charges fees for all its patients. The rajab written is a fragment of Yasin's letter, verse 58.

KH Farihin took Q.S. Yasin verse 58 (figure 6) which means “Peace!” will be ‘their’ greeting from the Merciful Lord. This ayah is believed to be able to help who reads it to get what him/her want, including healing from diseases.

The way to write the rajab is that the therapist writes the verse and reads it three times while holding his breath. The rajab paper is then placed in water for the patient to drink. The patient who received treatment from Mbah Temu was Ahmad Zainudin. Mbah Temu's residence is about 5 km from his house. He complained of migraines that would not go away even though he had gone to the doctor. After several days of drinking the rajab water, he felt better, and his feelings became calmer. The need factor is determined by the level of disease and the patient's condition. Patient behavior in seeking appropriate health services is greatly influenced by the level of disease, whether their health condition means they cannot carry out daily activities or not and the symptoms of the disease.

Kyai Sayyidin Lugianto's rajab treatment in Gombong District, Kebumen Regency is one of them. In carrying out his medical practice, Kyai Sayyid usually writes rajahs containing Arabic letter symbols, asma' al husna or monotheistic sentences on a piece of paper which is then dissolved in water.

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The water is then drunk by the patient. There are also two other methods; write the rajab on a bowl or plate then ask the patient to eat using that and write the rajab on the patient's back using wind oil or massage oil. The patient is also asked to drink boiled water from the leaves and read a certain amount of dhikr or prayer according to the patient's condition.

The rajab writing comes from the books of *Shams al Ma'arif al Kubra* and *Al Mujarrabat*. According to Kyai Sayyid, to be able to write a medical rajab, it is not enough just to quote these two books. There are several penances that must be done so that the rajab has healing properties. These penances include David's fasting, mutih fasting, ngerowot fasting, *dalailul khairat* fasting and reading certain wirids. According to the confession of Mr. Salam, who once received treatment from Kyai Sayyid, he chose this treatment because his stomach acid disease did not heal even though he had gone to the doctor. Apart from stomach acid, there were other complaints that made him feel that there were non-medical factors causing him to get sick. Every time he was about to perform ablution and pray, he suddenly fell as if someone had pushed him from behind. On the advice of his neighbor, Mr Salam then went to Kyai Sayyid's house for treatment. Kyai Sayyid saw a spirit creature attached to the patient's leg. Mr Salam then shared his work experience as a mortuary guard at a Community Health Center. Kyai Sayyid explained that this was what made it difficult for him to perform ablution and prayer. He then wrote a rajab on the patient's back with oil, asked him to drink boiled water from the leaves and read more prayers.

According to Mr. Salam, after that his illness healed, and no one pushed him every time he wanted to perform ablution and pray. Mr. Susilo, another patient, said that when he was working in Jakarta, he was invited to accompany his friend for treatment at a paranormal, but when he returned from there, he experienced various physical and psychological disorders. He often became dizzy; his words could not be controlled. When he heard someone talking badly, his head automatically turned to the left. He also frequently felt panic and fear without any reason. Mr Susilo had already gone to doctors and psychics but there was no change. He decided to return to Kebumen. From Mr. Salam, who is also his neighbor, he heard about Kyai Sayyid's ability to treat supernatural illnesses, so he went for treatment at his residence. There, Kyai Sayyid wrote a rajab on his back with oil, and asked him to read more prayers. After several weeks Mr Susilo recovered from his complaints.

Another traditional medicine practitioner is Mbah Sam, whose address is Jatihadi Village RT 02 RW 03 Sumber District, Rembang Regency. Mbah Sam wrote rajab on paper. The rajab written comes from the Qur'an, Surah Al Isra verse 105 juz 15 page 293. The rajab is then soaked in water and then drunk by the patient. The patient who came to ask for treatment was suffering from an
internal disease, namely heart disease, which had been suffering for a long time and had not been cured.

Figure 7. Rajah written by the therapist.

Mbah Sam took Surah Al Isra verse 105 (figure 7) which means “and with the truth We have sent the Qur'an down, and with the truth it has descended”. This rajah is believed can be healer of many diseases because Qur'an itself is a healing based on Surah Yunus verse 57: O humanity! Indeed, there has come to you a warning from your Lord, a cure for what is in the hearts, a guide, and a mercy for the believers.

A similar treatment technique was also applied by Mr Sholihin, who lived in Sumber Village RT 01 RW 02 Sumber District, Rembang Regency. Mr. Sholihin wrote the rajah on paper, which was then soaked in water, and then drunk by the patient. The rajah written by Mr. Sholihin was obtained from a Kyai diploma when studying traditional medicine.

Figure 8. Rajah written by the therapist.

Mr Sholihin wrote a diagram (figure 8) which contains the meaning “Allah is the self-subsisting, Ooo Almighty. Allah is The Dominant, Ooo Almighty, Ooo Almighty Allah is the greatest, praise be to Allah, there is no God but Allah, Muhammad peace be upon him is the messenger of Allah. In the Name of Allah, Who with His Name nothing can cause harm in the earth nor in the heavens, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing. Say, “He is Allah, [who is] One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent. I start with the name of Allah. I put my trust in Allah. Allah is the Protector. Allah is The Subtle. Allah is the pre-existing. Allah is The Ever Living, The self-subsisting. He does not sleep and does not die. In the name Allah I put my trust in Him. There is no power and no strength except with Allah. In the name of Allah, Allah willed it. There is no one can guide to the kindness but Allah. There is no power and no strength except with Allah. Ooo The Merciful, Ooo the Most Merciful, Ooo the Opener, Ooo All Knowing One, Ooo the Creator, Ooo the Wealthy, Ooo the Enricher, Ooo the
Flawless, Ooo the Owner of Absolute Sovereignty, there is no god except You. Exaltations to You! I was among the harmdoers. There is no God but Allah, Muhammad peace be upon him is the messenger of Allah”. This rajah contains of praises and acknowledgement that Allah is the almighty one, and every patient put his/her trust in Him to get cured and healed.

Patients get spiritual satisfaction after visiting traditional medicine practitioners. The prayers and rajah given by the therapist bring a feeling of comfort so that the pain is reduced. These therapists prioritize treatment by strengthening spiritual potential (sharpening the heart to recognize happiness) and fortifying the evil potential of lust and lust (diverting worldly pleasures to real pleasures in the afterlife)\textsuperscript{44}.

A person's belief system, in the Islamic view, is an intrinsic component of a person’s soul. If someone has a strong belief in the function of a drug and is willing to take it with full confidence, it is very likely that the drug will be successful in curing that person. Belief is software and is a kind of feeling that cannot be physically touched or manipulated. The soul is the main center of Islamic beliefs, and the body is in second place, so if a person is at peace in his soul, then his body will be at peace too\textsuperscript{45}.

Conclusion

The treatment techniques used by therapists differ from one patient to another. Most traditional medicine therapists use rajah wrote in Arabic. Rajah in traditional medicine is used to treat various kinds of patient complaints. The rajah writing comes from the books of \textit{Shams al Ma'arif al Kubra} and \textit{Al Mujarrabat}. Apart from taking sources from these two books, the therapist also wrote rajah derived from verses from the Qur'an. The rajah written by the therapists provide positive suggestions to the patients so that the patients feel calm. This calmness helps the patient to recover from the illness he is suffering from.

The need factor is determined by the level of disease and the patient’s condition. Patient behavior in seeking appropriate health services is greatly influenced by the level of disease, whether their health condition means they are


unable to carry out daily activities or not and the symptoms of the disease. Alternative medicine based on faith and spirituality is often chosen by people who have tried medical treatment but have not been cured. As an alternative treatment, *rajah* is believed to be able to cure diseases that cannot be cured medically. These diseases are caused by non-medical factors, such as witchcraft or black magic, but they influence a person's physical health.

*Rajah*, which is used as a means of healing, comes from verses from the Qur'an which were rewritten in the book of medicine. Proper interpretation and use of the Qur'an can provide effective improvements to a person's weak mental and psychological condition. Certain *surah* in the Qur'an, such as Yasin, al-Maryam, and ar-Rahman, can provide greater calm and peace to patients. Correct Al-Qur'an therapy, which includes listening to and reading the Al-Qur'an carefully, can have a big impact on people who need physical and mental treatment, as well as bringing other great benefits to Muslims.

**References**


