

Shamanism, nonsense and reality

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“Susuk” is a 2008 Malay movie on the theme of shamans. Featuring Ida Nerina, Diana Rafar and Adlin Aman Ramlee, this film is about a young nurse who turns to the practice of “susuk keramat” to be famous.

The person wearing a susuk, or charm needle, must sacrifice a number of human lives to maintain beauty, youth and popularity.

The film opened my eyes about superstitious practices that are followed until today.

Superstition is belief in something without any logical reasoning or facts. It comes in many forms and exists in every culture, and is related to luck, fortune-telling and the supernatural.

Recently, the word “bomoh”, or shaman, became a most popular word used by the international media..

As the Malaysian government defended its handling of the search for flight MH370, bomoh Ibrahim Mat Zin appeared at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, bearing coconuts and a “magic carpet”, to perform a ritual.

Ibrahim said this was to help “weaken the bad spirits so the rescuers can find the plane”.

The video of him doing a paddling act went viral, drawing mockery from all over the world. Many Malaysian netizens slammed the act, saying it brought shame to the country.

BBC Trending reported that the word “bomoh” was tweeted more than 200,000 times.

Meanwhile, Islamic religious departments and Islamic groups responded fiercely, because performing rituals such as this contravenes the teachings of Islam.

According to Britain's Mirror daily, psychic spoon-bender, Uri Geller, had reportedly said that he was asked to use his powers and “remote viewing” to assist in locating MH370.

He tweeted, “I have been asked to help. I believe in remote viewing. Can you help me? Can you please try to ‘see’ where YOU believe the plane went down? How and why, what are your own feelings, what does your intuitive sense tell you. THANKYOU.”

But Geller removed the tweets from his page, apparently after receiving a backlash of criticism.

Believing in magic or fortune telling is thought to be illogical. But many studies have shown that it is inevitable to have a certain level of belief in the supernatural, and this is also true even among the skeptics.

Shamanism is not a religion, but a form of spiritual practice. In fact, all religions have to some extent begun on a shamanic basis.

We are all mystics, somewhat. We have numerous superstitions.

One example is the belief that one should not walk the same way, or at least wait for someone else to pass, after a black cat walked pass.

Another example is the belief that good news is on its way if one's right eye leaps, and bad news if it's the left eye. Breaking glass is another bad omen. Do all these superstitions sound familiar?

Discussing superstitions, Hilda Roberts (1927) categorised them as “primitive” beliefs.

There has always been a debate on bomoh in Malaysia. But we cannot deny the Malay custom of believing in bomoh as an integral part of the culture.

In modern Korea, shamanism is an important repository of Korean culture. Korean shamanism focuses on solving daily life problems through communication between humans and the spiritual world.

Because the shaman rituals have preserved traditional costumes, music and dance, interestingly, the Korean government has promoted the rituals as “intangible cultural assets” or “important intangible treasure”.

In this modern society, the idea of practising shamanism simply does not fit into typical modern lifestyle for many.

Why do some still practice these seemingly illogical spiritual practices? There are explanations.

According to Stuart A. Vyse, author of one recent literature on “Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition”, superstition is aimed at achieving greater control. Arguably, shamanism offers psychological benefits that logic and science could not.

Vyse said, “When something important is at stake yet the outcome is uncertain, then superstitions are likely to be used to fill the gap and make us feel more confident.”

Another reasoning is that superstitions can be a source of comfort. Hence, shamanism and superstition, somewhat, bind all humanity throughout history and across cultural divisions.

Having said that, superstitions will still survive in this age of scientific advancement. – March 17, 2014.

** This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insider.*
