

# OVERCOMING LEARNING CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AS AN EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVE FOR THE ORANG ASLI

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**Abstract:** This is a conceptual paper that examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and education, with a focus on the Orang Asli community. In Malaysia, the implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb the spread of Coronavirus forced schools to close down and operate only through online classes (PdPR). Although this move was important for preventing the spread of COVID-19 among school children, the latter were confronted with the limitations of home-based online learning. This paper focuses on the Orang Asli and the challenges they faced pertaining to online learning (PdPR) during the pandemic. It will also suggest solutions to those problems based on the Orang Asli's traditional knowledge. This paper also attempts to develop an alternative solution using a novel concept known as the AKH-I model. This model addresses societal problems by analysing issues and solutions from both Islamic and contemporary perspectives. AKH-I guides key-players to take up their role as *khalifah* in addressing and engaging social issues by understanding them from the anthropological perspective whilst adhering to Islamic and moral principles, such as shariah-compliance, noble and righteous deeds, as well as spiritual guidance.

**Keywords:** Traditional Knowledge, Orang Asli, COVID-19 pandemic, AKH-I model.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has been plaguing the world for more than two years, has had a huge impact on our lives. This pandemic not only claimed millions of lives and altered our health priorities, but had far-reaching consequences for society in the long run. Apart from substantial economic deterioration, humans who are naturally 'social animals' have had to adapt to living in isolation for a very long period of time. To curb the spread of the disease, movement was restricted, borders were closed, social activities were

prohibited, offices and educational institutions were closed down, and all work and learning activities were done online. School closures have since become a hotly debated topic as people become concerned about the long term effects of the COVID-19 outbreak.

A study conducted by the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI) discovered that the impact of COVID-19 on ASEAN households has been significant. In Malaysia, on average only 36 per cent of students attended online school-based classes. Around 40 per cent came from richer households, compared to just 36 per cent from poorer households. In terms of the urban-rural household category, it was found that urban households had higher rates of attendance for online classes than rural households, with 38 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will focus on educational challenges among the Orang Asli during the pandemic. Orang Asli are the aboriginal people of Malaysia who inhabited the country much earlier than other groups of people. They can be divided into three main ethnic groups according to their language and dialect: Senoi, Proto Malay, and Negrito. For each ethnic group, there are six different sub-ethnic groups, making up a total of 18 communities. Their settlements are located across all states in Peninsular Malaysia, except in Perlis, Pulau Pinang, and the Federal Territories. As of 2018, there were a total of 178,197 Orang Asli living in 853 settlement areas. The majority of these are in Pahang, with a total number of 67,506 living in 262 different villages. Kedah has only one Orang Asli village, with only 270 Orang Asli. The largest ethnic group is the Senoi with a total of 97,856 people, followed by Proto Malay with 75,332 people and 5,009 Negritos. In terms of their beliefs and religions, a majority of Orang Asli (58,043) are animistic, 42,757 are atheists, and 35,975 are Muslims. The rest are followers of other religions such as Christianity, Bahai, and indigenous religion.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Although a minority group in Malaysia, Orang Asli have never been neglected by society. They receive attention from many parties, including academicians, politicians, government agencies, and non-governmental organisations. However, in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, they were somehow neglected as everyone was trying to cope with the situation. During this period, the Orang Asli struggled to cope with changes in the school learning process. As highlighted by UNESCO, those who are more vulnerable and marginalised will be more seriously impacted by long school closures. This will then lead to other complicated social issues, such as domestic violence, teenage pregnancies, sexual exploitation, and wider disparity between the rich and poor.

Therefore, this paper explores a pragmatic approach to solving the problems in learning and education faced by the Orang Asli community using principles outlined in the AKH-I model. The AKH-I model is an integrated model that emphasises both western and Islamic concepts when addressing diverse societal issues in line with an *ummatic* (social) vision. It is an empirically grounded model for the practicalities of its application.<sup>5</sup>

Although numerous models have been proposed to help Orang Asli to bridge the learning gap during this pandemic, the AKH-I model was chosen here due to its comprehensive approach to the problem. Several studies have suggested better ways for Orang Asli to enjoy the learning process, with most of them focusing on the need to fill the learning gap during PdPR.<sup>6,7</sup> However, the AKH-I model is more inclusive, not only because it focuses on the learning process, but also the responsibilities of keyplayers.

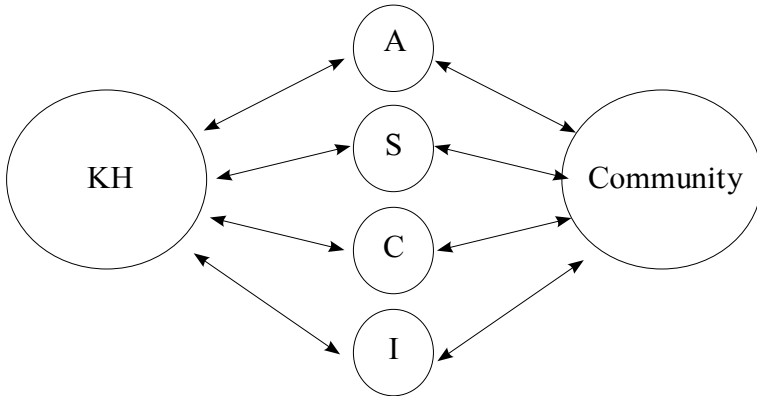
## AKH-I Model and Its Principles

The AKH-I model was developed based on how individuals took responsibility for assisting their society during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> The roles that they performed were in line with the concept of *khalifah*, contributing to achieving the *ummatic* (societal) vision. In Islam, humans are brought to this world as *khalifah* to fulfil their duty as servants of Allah, with societal and environmental responsibilities. They are equipped with a soul (*ruh*), self (*nafs*), as well as mental and psychological capacities, allowing them to be respected and honoured on a much higher level compared to other creatures on earth. As a *khalifah*, they are responsible for enhancing society's culture and civilisation.<sup>9,10</sup>

Reflecting on this, the AKH-I model highlights four important attributes that correlate with a *khalifah*'s responsibilities to solve societal problems. The first is related to society from the spectrum of 'Anthropological Imagination'. It is an imperative concept that allows us to understand various interpretations of culture and the way of life of a specific group, in our case the Orang Asli. Purcell's thought on 'Indigenous Knowledge' and 'Applied Anthropology' highlighted the significance of understanding indigenous culture.<sup>11</sup> According to Purcell, culture is the foundation of life and only by understanding it can we see the difference between how someone perceives and lives their lives. Lertzman and Vrendenburg also discovered that researchers often lack cultural protocol and deep understanding of traditional knowledge, leading to misunderstandings between indigenous people and outsiders.<sup>12</sup>

The next three unique attributes of the AKH-I model are 'Shariah-Compliance', 'Noble and Righteous Deeds', and 'Spiritual Guidance'. By

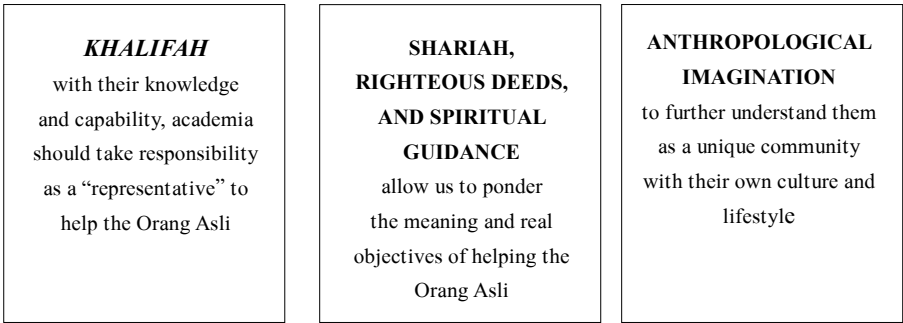
including these three concepts in our research, we are able to distinguish the AKH-I model from those based on a Western perspective.<sup>13,14</sup> Figure 1 depicts the framework of the AKH-I model:



KH	<i>Khalifah</i>
A	Anthropological Imagination
S	Shariah-Compliance
D	Noble and Righteous Deeds
I	Spiritual Guidance and Help ( <i>Ibadah</i> )

**Figure 1:** The AKH-I Model

We begin by identifying the educational problems facing the Orang Asli in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is followed by a discussion of their traditional knowledge, including its cultural and contextual concerns. Further, this paper will discuss how the incorporation of Islamic concepts, as suggested by the AKH-I model, will provide a constructive insight into this subject. Figure 2 illustrates the societal issues and engagements of the AKH-I model:



**Figure 2:** Societal Issues and Engagement of the AKH-I Model

### The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Statistical data from UNESCO shows that Malaysia was one of the countries in the world that implemented a long period of school closure following the COVID-19 outbreak. As of September 2021, schools in this country were closed for 48 weeks with a total of 7.9 million students affected. For the Orang Asli community, their children’s learning and development progress were far behind the general population of Malaysia even before the outbreak. The data shows that between 2015 and 2017, the percentage of secondary school drop-outs among the Orang Asli stood at 17.16 per cent, 16.75 per cent and 17.00 per cent consecutively.<sup>15</sup> These figures are significantly higher than the national average as of 2017, which was recorded at 2.48 per cent.<sup>16</sup>

Long periods of school closure have worsened the situation. One of the most worrying concerns is the limiting of physical interaction between students and teachers. Restricted interaction through online classes and other social media platforms makes the learning process ineffective. The academic assessment of students has to be holistic by including cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor developments. The utilisation of social media or online classes causes poor grading and an inability to absorb lessons effectively.

Second, school closures have caused major changes to daily family roles and routines, as parents need to rearrange their family duties and job responsibilities. Inadvertently, the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially affected the economic productivity of the family. Parents have to spend hefty amounts for internet connections and other social media gadgets to ensure their children can learn effectively. In addition, long term school closures create

social disparity between different social groups. For example, those from richer households will have better access to online classes compared to lower income students. In other words, the long term impact of this includes higher chances of school drop outs with various social problems.<sup>17, 18,19,20</sup>

This brings us to the next discussion: the effectiveness of online classes. There are many factors that weigh against the effectiveness of online classes, particularly relating to the availability of physical infrastructural facilities. The pressure is on those living in remote areas where internet connections are not accessible. Poor internet connection due to limited infrastructural facilities and geographical disparity development contribute to the ineffectiveness of online learning classes. In June 2020, the experience of a student from the Malaysian University of Sabah who had to climb a tree in the jungle to get better internet accessibility to study and sit for her examination sparked attention from all over the country and across the globe.<sup>21,22,23</sup> In addition, household economic factors may affect the ability of students to own gadgets or pay for internet usage. And even for those who have their own gadgets, they still need a close supervision and attention from their parents. Compared to classroom learning, online classes require parents to be more participative in their children's learning process.<sup>24,25,26,27</sup>

Aside from the above, the mental and psychosocial impact of the pandemic is also worrying, especially among students and adolescents. The online learning process has limited social interaction between lecturers and students, and also among fellow colleagues. Such 'space limitation' has created other confounding issues related to stress and psychology, such as depression, loneliness and dysfunctional behaviours. The mounting pressure is more evident among lower income groups as they have limited space in their houses.<sup>28</sup> Studies have shown that adolescents use the internet as a space to escape reality during lockdown. By spending hours on social media and online gaming platforms, they seek entertainment and communication with their peers. In other words, restrictions imposed by the authorities, such as movement control orders have introduced a new mode of living. Individuals are required to adopt new norms and, at the same time, rely heavily on social media or internet usage for daily life routines.<sup>29</sup>

Based on our analysis, we can see that Orang Asli students are exposed to all of these challenges and social-cultural impacts. A study by Md Nor et al. discovered that school drop-outs among Orang Asli were caused by poverty, low-educated parents, lack of infrastructure, poor academic achievement, and the ineffectiveness of a centralised education system.<sup>30</sup> Similar findings were found by Wong & Abdillah on the teaching and learning issues of the Orang Asli.<sup>31</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected our normal livelihood and the Orang Asli too. One strategy that might be helpful in filling the educational gap is encouraging the Orang Asli to focus on preserving their traditional knowledge. The World Health Organisation (WHO) COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan also emphasised the specific need to assist indigenous people with COVID-19. For better communication and distribution of information, WHO sought the help of trusted people or key personalities from among the group's members, such as the headmen of the villages and traditional healers, to disseminate information on COVID-19.<sup>32,33</sup> Reflecting on this, traditional knowledge can also be utilised as an educational alternative, not just for the community of Orang Asli, but for other community members at large.

## Orang Asli and Their Traditional Knowledge

Traditional knowledge refers to the customs and beliefs of Orang Asli. Their knowledge is accumulated from observation of their surroundings, daily practice and livelihood. It is often passed down from one generation to another informally, either by observation or oral communication.<sup>34,35,36,37,38</sup> The understanding of culture is closely related to way of life, communal beliefs and knowledge sharing.<sup>39</sup> Traditional knowledge is unique and insightful because it is often built upon a special connection with the environment. Since the Orang Asli live closely with nature, they have a vast knowledge of dealing, living, and preserving the ecosystem.

There are three main principles when it comes to the Orang Asli's relationship with the wilderness. The first refers to the concept of collective ownership of all forest products. Second, the need to respect all animals and plants as the forest belongs to the Creator. Finally, that the forest and its resources are fundamental for the life and sustainability of Orang Asli.<sup>40</sup> Since most of their settlement areas are located in remote locations, the Orang Asli's depend substantially on natural resources for their survival. Therefore, they have vast knowledge and experience of the types of plants, herbs, and animals in the wild. This knowledge includes how to hunt and capture animals, identifying and collecting edible plants in the wild for daily consumption, and applying beneficial remedies for health.<sup>41,42,43,44,45,46,47</sup> Unfortunately, due to massive deforestation, some valuable natural resources are very difficult to find in the wild, creating great challenges for the Orang Asli's survival. Alternatively, they begin to grow those plants and herbs within their settlement areas. However, some of them found that the plants' benefits are not the same compared to the ones they find in the wild.<sup>48,49,50</sup>

A majority of the Orang Asli still depend on traditional medicinal knowledge for treating diseases. They frequently travel into the forest searching for wild plants, herbs or animals to treat their ailments. The resultant herbal concoctions will be used to treat either mild, minor or even severe symptoms of illness. In other words, rigorous efforts for developing health facilities within the locality of Orang Asli areas or settlements by the authorities does not bring any significant effect to their existing traditional knowledge, as far as traditional medicinal matters are concerned. Such traditional knowledge is an imperative and must be well documented for the future.

For Orang Asli, herbal remedies will eventually be inherited by future generations. This justifies their reasoning for poor utilisation of the medical facilities provided by the government. Thus, their traditional medical knowledge appears to be prioritised over other medical treatments.<sup>51,52,53,54</sup> Apart from depending on herbal or animal-based remedies for treatment, many Orang Asli, particularly non-Muslims, perform ceremonial rituals to calm malevolent spirits in an effort to cure their illnesses. The Jah Hut group, for example, utilises wood carvings as a conduit to interact with spirits or other supernatural beings.<sup>55</sup>

It is evident that traditional Orang Asli medical knowledge is strongly governed by cultural beliefs and practices. Cultural dances, rituals, and crafts are part of their community-engagement with the 'metaphysical' world in order to please supernatural forces or spirits. These cultural performances are meant to maintain a good relationship with their surroundings. They strongly believe that supernatural forces or spirits have significant affects on their livelihood, health and fertility.<sup>56,57,58</sup> However, due to conversion and assimilation with the Malay Muslim communities living within their vicinity, only a few Orang Asli still adhere to these beliefs. Most now perform cultural dances, music, and making craft products as part of their cultural only. Nevertheless, cultural craftsmanship and performances symbolise the underlying values and worldview of the Orang Asli, creating great opportunity for the Orang Asli to participate in the tourism industry.<sup>59,60,61</sup> The cultural showcase and craft products of Orang Asli are important and should be preserved for future generations.<sup>62,63,64</sup>

Economic and monetary concerns are now becoming the driving factors for the Orang Asli to maintain their traditional knowledge. New settlement areas with roads and highways are exposing the Orang Asli to the outside world. Changes within their community are remarkable, as are Orang Asli efforts to retain their traditional knowledge. Their traditional way of living has to give way to change, especially if they are to participate in the subsistence economy. The Orang Asli's main source of income usually comes from their traditional knowledge skills. They sell plants, animal products and other jungle produce collected in the wild



either to Chinese or Malay middle-men. Interestingly, eco-tourism activities have opened a way for them to preserve their culture and traditional knowledge.

However, the connection between traditional knowledge and economic and monetary values has caused conflict, including the monopoly of forest resources by third parties. The middle-man, for example, frequently manipulates the market value of products. As the gatherer of jungle products, the Orang Asli receive lower prices for the items sold to the middle-man, who makes more money by selling the items at a higher value in the open market. Such manipulation also takes place in the eco-tourism industry.<sup>65,66,67</sup> As a result, the Orang Asli remain a marginalised community. In most cases, the middle-man tends to manipulate and monopolise resources and supply-chains. This makes the Orang Asli feel that they have little power to voice out their concerns.<sup>68,69,70</sup>

It is interesting to highlight that a lot of initiatives have been done by the indigenous community to preserve and elevate their indigenous knowledge. The people of the Pacific Islands, for example, have been sharing and teaching their indigenous knowledge via online learning even before the pandemic hit. Due to their geographical location, they made use of technologies to teach and share their customs and cultures with younger generations.<sup>71</sup>

However, the situation in Malaysia is quite different. Despite a lot of effort, the Orang Asli have difficulty continuing programmes independently. Although Orang Asli are flexible to change and development, they are often neglected. Interference from other parties often means they are excluded from even their own affairs.<sup>72</sup> As such, by guiding Orang Asli to focus on learning we can encourage them to become master of their own traditional knowledge and empowered to be in control of what they know best. And this will also allow them to then share and teach their knowledge to those outside their communities. Those who believe in themselves become a people with great ambitions. And if younger generations are highly ambitious people, it will create change in society at large. The younger generation is the reflection of our future. If the younger generation is weak, then we, as *khalifah*, should help them to realise and maximise their ability and skills. This will eventually develop a strong society and nation.

Capacity building includes documenting existing traditional knowledge, enhancing herbal potential through scientifically proven methods, processing herbs into new products (rather than retailing in raw form), and learning new marketing strategies. This is a long journey and requires collaborative efforts among all parties. If successful, it will not only lead to stronger economic growth, but also a long-term source of capital.<sup>73</sup>

## AKH-I Model as a Concept to Uplift Orang Asli's Traditional Knowledge

This discussion began by stressing the role and responsibility of a *khalifah*, as mentioned by the Qur'an: "He is the One Who has placed you as successors on earth and elevated some of you in rank over others, so He may test you with what He has given you. Surely your Lord is swift in punishment, but He is certainly All-Forgiving, Most Merciful" (al-An'am, 6:165).

We believe that academia has the ability and expertise to play the role of *khalifah* with respect to the Orang Asli. An engagement with the Orang Asli should be based on how that community understands itself, not merely the perspective of a 'scientist' understanding their 'sample'. Academia should encourage the Orang Asli to be proud of their knowledge and assist them in sharing and enriching their knowledge within the community, especially the younger generation.

In the Qur'an, Allah says: "Say, are those who know equal to those who know not?" (al-Zumar 39:9). This verse allows us to ponder how vital it is for one to learn and keep away from being ignorant. And how significant it is that *iqra'*, which means 'recite' or 'read', was the very first revelation sent to the Prophet Muhammad. What sits behind reciting and reading is knowledge. There are many verses in the Qur'an that enjoin its followers to seek knowledge, not only of things related to religious matters but also worldly knowledge. It can be understood that learning is part of the noble and righteous duties (or *'ibadah*) that seek the pleasure of Allah. The concept of *'ibadah* works in a holistic way, such that assisting the Orang Asli is also *'ibadah*. At the same time, it is also a form of *'ibadah* for the Orang Asli to learn and to teach their traditional knowledge to others.

Unfortunately, due to the obstacles and hindrances of school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the need to seek knowledge has declined. Obviously, during this school shutdown, it became more difficult for the Orang Asli to adjust to learning via online platforms. Unwittingly, this could assist us in introducing the Orang Asli to an alternative mode or source of knowledge: traditional knowledge disseminated and shared with others.

The position of humans in the expansion of knowledge is divided into two: as a source of knowledge and as a seeker of knowledge. Although knowledge in Islam is objective in nature, it is not limited to subjects which can be empirically measured. Following the revelation of the Qur'an, other disciplines such as science, poetry, astronomy, and all other areas that are valuable to society were enlightened.<sup>74,75</sup> Zainal Abidin categorises three types of knowledge in Islam based on the Qur'an: knowledge of God, knowledge of the universe,

and knowledge of *insan* (humanity).<sup>76</sup> Knowledge of the universe encourages humanity to learn about the meaning behind all creation. The traditional knowledge of the Orang Asli is a subject very closely related to knowledge of the universe and of *insan*.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The traditional knowledge of the Orang Asli was culturally formed, mostly via observation and experience with the natural environment. However, in the absence of empirical evidence, such knowledge has been neglected by the scientific world. Therefore, by adopting the AKH-I model, we may broaden our understanding of knowledge. This is where the role of the scholarly community is significant, as academia can be the facilitator and mediator of Orang Asli knowledge. One important aspect is to motivate the Orang Asli to pass down their traditional knowledge; their senior group represents the knowledge ‘owner’ and their youngsters are the knowledge ‘seekers’. As traditional knowledge was usually passed down informally by word of mouth, observation or practice, knowledge must now be properly documented.

The United Nation has projected that for the first time in 30 years, the world’s standard of education, health, and living is expected to decline due to job losses and the long term socio-economic impact of COVID-19.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, now is the right time to promote traditional knowledge as a legitimate learning experience for the Orang Asli. This will not only allow them to become equipped with the whole learning process, but it will also prepare them for their community’s future endeavours and survival in the competitive modern world. Traditional knowledge must be restructured, improved, documented, and shared with the larger community in order to assist our future development. Such needs are critical not just for the survival of traditional knowledge per se, but for the survival of mankind, as far as knowledge is concerned.

This would be a viable solution to the issue of marginalisation and discrimination, particularly in the context of the Orang Asli community. For their future and survival, the Orang Asli must participate in decision-making. Indigenous communities should be allowed to direct their own cultural development, particularly in terms of indigenous knowledge preservation. This approach is important for preserving traditional knowledge and developing a strong indigenous community, such as the Inuits and Maoris.<sup>78,79,80</sup>

This paper is a first step towards more in-depth research since this topic requires a profound, broad, and more inclusive analysis. The attempt to acquire thorough data and establish a solid team to perform this assignment will require

more time, effort, and a better grasp not just of the issue but also of mutual understanding among stakeholders. As such, this study will act as a starting point for furthering this research and attracting the attention of other experts in this subject.

## Notes

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