

# Qualitative Study: The Role of Traditional Bejah and Poultice Practices in Uterine Recovery in Postpartum Mothers

Ummey Yuniantini<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Midwifery Study Program, Aisyiyah Polytechnic Pontianak, Indonesia

Email: [ummy@polita.ac.id](mailto:ummy@polita.ac.id)

**Abstract.** *Background the postpartum period includes a critical transition period for mothers and babies physiologically, emotionally, and socially. According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2019, maternal mortality rates are very high, every day around 810 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the use of bejah and poultice on the process of uterine involution in postpartum mothers in Pontianak. The research method used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design. This approach was chosen to explore in depth the experiences, perceptions, and meanings felt by postpartum mothers regarding the use of bejah and poultice. Research Results Bejah and poultice are common health treatments carried out by postpartum mothers among Malay people in Pontianak. Bejah is considered a traditional antibiotic to speed up the healing of birth canal wounds. Poultice is ash from burning wood or coconut mixed with tamarind and other spices. Poultice is applied on the stomach, under the octopus. Conclusion Overall, the practice of bejah and poultice in Pontianak can be seen as a traditional approach that has the potential to support the process of uterine involution psychologically and culturally.*

**Keywords:** Bejah, Poultice, Uterine Involution, Postpartum Mothers

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## INTRODUCTION

The postpartum period encompasses a critical transition period for both mother and baby, physiologically, emotionally, and socially (Lassi et al., 2014). In both developed and developing countries, the primary focus for mothers and babies is on pregnancy and childbirth. However, the actual situation is actually quite different, as the risk of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality is more common in the postpartum period (Filippi et al., 2018).

According to 2019 data from the World Health Organization (WHO), maternal mortality rates are very high, with approximately 810 women dying daily from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Ward et al. (2023) said that, between 2000 and 2017, the maternal mortality ratio (MMR, the number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births) decreased by approximately 38% worldwide. 94% of all maternal deaths occur in low- and lower-middle-income countries. According to the WHO, postpartum hemorrhage is the leading cause of maternal death. Each year, 14 million mothers, or 11.4%, suffer from postpartum hemorrhage (PPH) worldwide.

The Malay ethnic group is the most populous ethnic group in Pontianak City. Fithriani et al. (2024) said that, these customs are deeply rooted in the majority of the local community and are passed down through generations, believed to be beneficial. Malays believe that a mother's health must be given utmost attention during the postpartum period, as complications during the postpartum period are very dangerous for the mother and can lead to death (Fadzil et al., 2016; Hishamshah et al., 2010; Norhayati et al., 2017).

Various efforts are made by Malays in Pontianak to care for maternal health during the postpartum period (Bahar, 2020). These treatments include herbal decoctions, dietary restrictions, activities, clothing, and traditional remedies believed to be effective in treating postpartum complications (Lamxay et al., 2011). One postpartum treatment among Malays in Pontianak is the bejah and poultice. These treatments are believed by Malays to accelerate postpartum healing.

Research on the effectiveness of the use of bejah and poultice in uterine involution is still limited. Previous research suggests that the use of bengkung or stagen has a similar function to bejah and poultice in supporting uterine involution in postpartum women. Based on the results of research conducted by Siyoto (2019), it was shown that administering bengkung for 7 days accelerated the process of uterine involution compared to postpartum mothers who did not receive bengkung. Although, the results of this study also did not indicate that all those who received bengkung intervention experienced faster involution than normal, this could be due to other factors such as the influence of parity, nutritional intake, and mobilization measures undertaken.

Based on the results of a preliminary study conducted in 4 different areas in Pontianak City, researchers interviewed one informant each, namely mothers of Malay ethnicity and who had given birth from the Districts of West Pontianak, South Pontianak, Pontianak City, and East Pontianak. Of the four informants interviewed, two mothers said that they underwent all postpartum health care processes according to Malay customs (Sychareun et al., 2016). One person did so but not routinely every day, and one did not do so because she lived far from her parents, but knew about postpartum care for Malay people in Pontianak. Two informants who did undergo postpartum care according to Malay customs felt their bodies were healthier when they followed the recommended recommendations. One informant who did not regularly do so, was sick and had fevers in the 40 days after giving birth. One informant who did not undergo postpartum care according to Malay customs, said that her body had experienced a bentan and was then taken to the village to be cared for by her family.

## METHODS

### Research Type and Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design. This approach was chosen to explore in-depth the experiences, perceptions, and meanings felt by postpartum mothers and traditional practitioners regarding the use of bejah and poultices in the process of uterine involution. This study aims to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of subjects directly involved in the practice.

### Location and Time of Research

The research was conducted in several areas in Pontianak City, West Kalimantan, where traditional bejah and poultice practices are still actively practiced. The study lasted for three months, from February to April 2025.

### Research Informants

Informants in this study were selected using purposive sampling techniques with the following criteria: (1) Mothers who have been in the postpartum period and have used bejah and/or poultices; (2) Practitioners or traditional midwives who practice bejah and poultices; (3) Health workers (midwives/doctors) who have experience or knowledge of these traditional

practices in the Pontianak community. The number of informants will be determined based on the principle of data saturation, namely when no new relevant information is found.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data were collected through the following methods:[5] (1) In-depth interviews using semi-structured interview guidelines; (2) Limited participant observation of the process of using bejah and poultices; (3) Documentation, such as field notes, photographs (with permission), and traditional materials used. All interviews will be recorded (with the informant's consent) and transcribed for analysis.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The analysis process was carried out in several stages: (1) Transcribing the interview data verbatim; (2) Reading and understanding the contents of the transcript repeatedly; (3) Coding the data to find the main themes; (4) Grouping the themes that emerged based on similarity of meaning and relevance; (5) Compiling an interpretation of the findings based on the themes obtained.

### **Data Validity**

Data validity is maintained through several techniques: (1) Source triangulation, namely comparing information from mothers, traditional practitioners, and health workers; (2) Member check, namely confirming interview results with informants; (3) Peer debriefing, namely discussing with fellow researchers or supervising lecturers to avoid interpretation bias.

### **Research Ethics**

This research received approval from the Research Ethics Committee. All informants were given an explanation of the aims and benefits of the research and were asked to sign an informed consent form before the interview process began. Confidentiality of informants' identities and personal data was fully guaranteed (Helgesson, 2015).

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Common Health Care for Postpartum Mothers in Pontianak Malays**

Postpartum maternal health care in Malay culture is performed immediately after delivery and continues for up to 40 days afterward. Bejah is a Malay term that, according to locals, equates to prevention. Preventive measures must be taken before the disease worsens. Bejah is also considered a traditional antibiotic to speed up the healing of birth wounds, prevent swelling, and prevent infection.

*"... bejah is Malay, which means it is treated before the disease gets worse. For example, if someone is sick, after giving birth there is a wound... But in Kampong Mane, there are people who use needles... So, most people say, bejah so that it doesn't swell. Bejah is like traditional antibiotics, so that it swells or inspects... so that your uterus, which was originally injured, is surgically treated with the aim of... dying. cockroach... the wound is tight... it heals quickly..."*  
(Mrs J, 67 years old)

According to Mrs. MB, bejah is performed by heating a wok/cauldron, then placing it between the postpartum mother's legs. The postpartum mother only wears a sarong. The hot wok/cauldron is doused with boiled spices such as sari wangi, galangal leaves, klotok banana leaves, and lempuyang leaves. In addition to using a wok, you can also use a roasted coconut shell, which is then placed between the mother's legs and doused with the boiled spices. It is hoped that after the bejah is performed, hot steam will rise and the mother's vagina and uterus will return to their original size. Bejah is performed only once immediately after giving birth.

*"...a heated wok is not a cure for that, bejah. Our little one will be so cowardly inside. The wok is heated, then we straddle the jiros with aek, then we do this... (hand directs the smoke to be directed to the genitals), well, the spices are the fragrant essence of galangal leaves,*

*which are first broken up, the fragrant essence, galangal leaves, anak leaves, klotok banana leaves, then broken up the klotok banana leaves, galangal leaves, put them in there. The aek that we have broken up earlier, pour it up and then it will go up, even if we don't go into the wok, we roast the coconut shell, when we lift our nails, hahhh that's great. It's done in the morning, after giving birth, we work straight away, for example, you do it at night hahh for the night, give birth in the morning for the morning..." (Mrs. MB, 75 years old)*

One postpartum maternal health treatment also performed immediately after delivery is the Poultice. The Poultice treatment is believed to restore the uterus to its normal size.

*"... after we finished drinking aek stew, how bad it is for our stomachs, we've put a poultice on our stomachs, ..." (Mrs. MB, 75 years old)*

A poultice is the ashes from burning wood or coconut, mixed with tamarind and other spices. It is then applied to the abdomen, below the octopus. Before the octopus is applied, the mother's abdomen will be covered with a poultice. The use of the poultice depends on the condition of the mother's abdomen. If the mother's abdomen has not returned to normal, the poultice will continue to be used. However, generally, the poultice is used for approximately 25 to 30 days. According to Mrs. MB, the poultice is best applied at night.

*"...if you want to poultice at night, the bende doesn't itch. It'll take a long time if your stomach is swollen, you'll have a lot of it. Once you've poached the noni leaves, you arrange them, then add the octopus, so this stuff won't be absorbed by the kekaen, there's a poultice. Poultice the stomach with ash, dapok ash, heeh lang, give tamarind," (Mrs MB, 75 years old)*

After the octopus bandage is placed on the mother's abdomen, she will then be given a bengkung (stagen) to maintain a normal, slim body shape, warm the abdomen, aid in postpartum healing, and prevent uterine prolapse. Bengkung is worn from three days postpartum to four days postpartum. Bengkung is not only applied to the abdomen but is also typically applied to the thighs, to restrict the mother's movement to speed up the healing process. The results of this study indicate that the use of traditional bejah and poultices by postpartum mothers in Pontianak has a perceived positive contribution to uterine involution. These findings were obtained through in-depth interviews with ten participants, including postpartum mothers who used bejah and poultices, traditional midwives, and formal healthcare workers.

### **Postpartum Mothers' Perceptions of Bejah and Poultices**

Most postpartum mothers reported that bejah (a type of poultice) caused discomfort, burning, and stinging in the birth canal area. They experienced abdominal cramps, not only due to bejah but also due to uterine contractions after delivery. After bejah, the birth canal wound felt less painful and healed more quickly than without bejah. They believed bejah helped speed the return of the uterus to its original size. Another treatment used was a poultice, a mixture of ashes from burning wood, tamarind, and other spices. The poultice is believed to help speed the return of the uterus to its normal size. Of the five postpartum mothers interviewed, only three underwent bejah treatment because they were accompanied by a traditional midwife or parents who could provide bejah care. The two postpartum mothers who did not undergo bejah did so because they were only with their husbands immediately after giving birth, so neither was able to perform bejah care. All five postpartum mothers used poultices. All interviewed shared the belief that poultices can speed the return of the uterus to its original size.

### **Health Worker Perspective**

Interviewed healthcare workers acknowledged that the use of bejah and poultices is still widely practiced in the community, particularly by mothers who give birth at home or in families that adhere to traditional traditions. Although there is limited quantitative data demonstrating their medical effectiveness, some midwives reported no negative effects as long as their use is not excessively rigorous or prolonged (Renfrew et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2012). This is consistent with

previous studies suggesting that harmless cultural practices can be utilized as a complementary approach to midwifery care (Shewamene et al., 2020).

### **Effectiveness in the Context of Uterine Involution**

From observations and interviews, it was found that mothers who used bejah and poultices reported a reduction in complaints such as pain, a feeling of "emptiness" in the abdomen, and excessive vaginal discharge in the first week after delivery. While these results are subjective, mothers felt more comfortable and confident during the postpartum period. Several midwives noted that the uterine fundal height of mothers who used bejah tended to decrease more rapidly in the first week. However, because this was a qualitative study, this needs further testing in a quantitative study with objective measurements (Trafimow, 2014; Swanborn, 1996).

### **Local Cultural and Belief Factors**

Postpartum health care practiced by Malays is a complex and interdependent system. This care has its own meaning and function, and is passed down through generations. Postpartum health care begins immediately after delivery and continues for 40 days after delivery. Common postpartum health care practices among Malays include bejah, which involves drinking herbal medicine and decoctions, applying sacrificial acupressure, using param (a type of herbal medicine) and pilis (a type of body acupressure), and then massaging the mother's body for 40 days. Immediately after giving birth, a bejah is performed. According to Malay beliefs, bejah is a preventive measure. This prevention focuses more on the mother's genitals after delivery, and is performed to prevent swelling and infection in the postpartum woman's genitals (Karsnitz, 2013; Childs et al., 2020). Bejah is performed immediately after delivery by heating a wok/cauldron and placing it between the mother's legs. The postpartum mother wears only a sarong. The hot wok/cauldron is doused with boiled spices such as sari wangi (fragrant essence), galangal leaves, klotok banana leaves, and lempuyang leaves.

Besides using a wok, a roasted coconut shell can also be used, placed between the mother's legs and doused with boiled spices. Yuniantini & Nurvembrianti (2022) said that, it is hoped that after the bejah, steam will rise, and the mother's vagina and uterus will return to their original size. Bejah is performed only once immediately after delivery. Bejah is also considered a traditional antibiotic. Spices such as betel, vetiver, sappanwood, nutmeg, and others are boiled. Gauze is dipped in the boiled water and applied to the vaginal wound. The boiled water can also be used to clean the mother's genitals after urinating (cebok). According to belief and experience, performing bejah restores the uterus and vagina to normal, preventing swelling and infection in the mother's genitals. Further treatment after drinking the boiled water and herbal medicine during the postpartum period includes a "Potal" (a skin-to-skin) on the abdomen, a powder called "Param" on the entire body, and a "Pilis" (a patch) on the forehead above the eyebrows. The purpose of using a poultice is to help the belly, which has enlarged after giving birth, return to its normal size and prevent sagging. It's also believed to help the uterus return to its normal size. A poultice is made from ashes from burning wood or coconut, mixed with tamarind, and placed on the abdomen under the octopus.

After the octopus bandage is applied to the mother's abdomen, she is then given a bengkung (stagen) bandage. According to traditional beliefs, the purpose of bengkung is to restore the body's normal, slim shape, warm the abdomen, aid the postpartum healing process, and prevent uterine prolapse. Bengkung is worn from three days postpartum to four days postpartum. Bengkung is not only applied to the abdomen but is also commonly applied to the thighs, with the goal of restricting the mother's movement to facilitate a speedy healing process. Beliefs in bejah and poultices are not merely functional but also symbolic and spiritual. Many mothers believe that not wearing a bejah will cause the body to catch a cold or even diminish their honor as mothers. Therefore, this practice impacts not only the physical but also the psychological and social well-being of postpartum mothers (Webb et al., 2008; Lesser et al., 2023; Molgora & Accordini, 2020). This supports the concept of cultural competence in midwifery care, which emphasizes the importance of understanding local culture in healthcare delivery.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the practice of bejah and poultice in Pontianak can be viewed as a traditional approach that has the potential to support the process of uterine involution psychologically and culturally. Although not yet fully clinically proven, the subjective experiences of mothers and the recognition of health workers suggest that this practice is worthy of consideration as part of culture-based midwifery care.

## SUGGESTIONS

Further quantitative research is needed to more objectively test the clinical effectiveness of this practice.

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