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## Tabiat Kariasali: The Affiliative Leadership of the Informal *Taumaas* of the Suluk Communities on the East Coast of Sabah

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### Abstract

The *taumaas* (headman), as the *nakura'* (leader) and a *sara'* (lawgiver) of the *adat* (customs) appointed by the *udduk hula'* (permanent resident), is the informal leader following the customs and traditions to exercise traditional authority over the Suluk communities. This study explores the *tabiat kariasali* (instinctual role) of the informal *taumaas* leadership in the Sabah East Coast Suluk communities, which uses a unique form of community leadership that addresses different community needs, including emotional well-being, spiritual harmony, social vices, educational needs, and healthcare. Through interviews with the nine *taumaas* in Semporna, Lahad Datu, and Sandakan in Sabah, the study reveals the strengths of the *taumaas* system. Thematic analysis of the responses highlights these leadership strengths, promoting social harmony through traditional mediation methods and integrating *nasihat* (religion) and governance to address emotional and spiritual needs while utilizing flexible collaboration and transformative justice approaches to combat social vices. Additionally, the creativity of the *taumaas* system is demonstrated through community-based literacy programs and the integration of traditional healing and healthcare practices in the Suluk community. However, the study also finds that the challenges they face, particularly in securing funds to sustain essential programs and the responsibilities of the *taumaas*, encompassing conflict resolution, education, and healthcare, create tension given limited financial resources. The official acknowledgment and support from the authorities would significantly enhance the informal leader's endeavors to uphold peace and order and advance human development and cultural preservation. It is hoped that this study could explore potential solutions to resource constraints and investigate how the system can adapt when challenges arise in the Suluk community.

**Keywords:** Suluk, instinctual role, informal *taumaas*, Suluk communities, Sabah

Traditionally, communities that have led to vast diversity in local customs and practices appear in nation-states with the coming of leaders who use socio-economic and political attributes as objective bases for sustaining local communities. A massive cultural shift in how leaders and communities work as individuals and harmonious communities is taking place with the knowledge and practices represented by their local leaders. As stated by Goleman et al. (2009), a leader is valued not so much for being an expert but also for his ability to inspire, engage, and motivate individuals in the community through instinctual roles utilizing affiliative leadership.

According to DataReportal (2024), Malaysia's population in 2024 was 34.49 million, of which 48.9% were female and 51.1% were male. The demographic data further revealed a significant urban-rural divide, with 78.9% of the population residing in urban areas and 21.1% in rural areas. In recent years, there has been a notable shift in Malaysia's leadership style towards more participatory and collaborative approaches, particularly in regions such as the East Coast of Sabah.

As narrated by Hadji Omar (2008), Suluk or Tausug, which means 'people of the current', is among the indigenous peoples of Sabah, Sulu Island, and Kalimantan (Hidayah, 2005). The Suluk speak using the Suluk language or Bahasa Sug, which belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian group (Ingilan, 2020, p. 44); the locals call it *Sinug*. They are peace-loving people (Bruno, 1973; Bara, 2009), friendly and hospitable (Bruno, 1973), and unconquered (Hedjazi & Hedjazi, 2002; Ingilan, 2018a, 2018b). However, Suluk's heart is fearless when facing death for justice and angelic when helping those who seek his help. In Saleeby's book (1908), Suluk are known as law experts, such as Sultan Jamalul Alam, and observed by Kiefer (1972) as mediation experts. Being devoted to the Islamic faith (Rasul, 2003), the Suluk people are brave and nationalistic in protecting their unique culture, beliefs, and homeland, even at the expense of their lives (Hedjazi et al., 2002; Ingilan & Abdurajak, 2021).

In Sabah, the Suluk communities are primarily in Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna, and Kota Kinabalu. The Suluk community headman is known as *taumaas*. Etymologically, *tau* means person, and *maas* refers to elder or parent. *Taumaas* also means *nakura*' (leader) and a *sara*' (lawgiver) of the *adat* (customs) court. Being a socio-religious leader officially sanctions the *paggulal* (installation) of the titles of the *imam*, *bilal*, and *khatib* (Jundam, 2006). As an *adat* leader appointed by the *udduk hula*' (permanent resident), his people entrust all *adat*-related activities to him. Among his roles are preserving *adat* (Kiefer, 1972) and resolving conflict (Jundam, 2006).

Generally, *Taumaas* is a father of the community who envisions a harmonious and prosperous society. The state-appointed Ketua Kampung<sup>1</sup> as the Village Development and Security Committee chairperson to provide a bridge between local communities and the government<sup>2</sup>. Correspondingly, the *Taumaas* serve as the chairperson in the Sabah East Coast Suluk communities, and there are two categories of *taumaas*: the formal *taumaas* and the informal *taumaas*. The formal or official *taumaas* are composed of two leaders, the *Ketua Kampung* (headman), officially appointed by a local official, and *Ketua Komuniti* (community headman), appointed by the Malaysian federal task force to lead the refugee settlement scheme<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, informal *taumaas* formed alliances with the chairperson of the Task Force through friendship and kinship (Kiefer, 1969), and the coalition made them more powerful and strengthened their influence. According to Koentjaraningrat (1977), as cited in Rosyati (2009), the informal leader (Suluk chieftain or informal *taumaas*) is more influential than the formal leader. Yet, he has a vital role in the community as in-charged with the welfare of their people (Haji Omar, 1983); his power depends on wealth and resource control (Kiefer, 1969). Also, he is mandated to secure

<sup>1</sup>Ketua Kampung assists the penghulu in implementing government development projects at the individual kampung level.

<sup>2</sup>In Malaysia, the Village Development and Security Committee is a community-based organization that acts as a governing body that delivers information and development programs from the Federal and State governments or agencies to the village communities.

<sup>3</sup>A scheme that allows refugees to live and work legally in Malaysia would transform the quality and protection of their lives.

peace and order, following the customs and traditions to exercise authority over their community.

Today, the Suluk Ketua Kampung (headman) in Sabah, Malaysia, is tasked to cooperate with the authorities to protect and secure the community (Sharip Hassim, 2013). As called *sara'* (lawgiver or judge), endowed with legal power like conflict prevention and mediation are significant activities in the Suluk communities since they neutralize conflict. As explained by Jundam (2006), the informal *taumaas* take a higher sense of responsibility in which perfect justice is less important than peace and order. In addition, supporting this statement, the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM), conceptualized by Danial et al. (2024, p. 100), aims to restore *kahanungan* (inner peace) by rebuilding the *maruwa* (dignity) and *martabbat* (honor and self-respect) of each disputant through the re-establishment of *pangandul* (trust) and *kasilasa* (affectionate love). The Suluk believes successful mediation heals tensions and emotions, resulting in the disputants' embracing forgiveness and camaraderie. Another illustration of the *taumaas*' disposition towards peaceful relations is their discouragement of having two *langgals* in a small community (Jundam, 2006). It is aimed at avoiding division and rivalry.

Moreover, the Suluk headman (*taumaas*) possesses qualities such as courageous, sympathetic, influential, intellectual, heroic, and intelligent (Kiefer, 1972). These informal *taumaas* are skillful in rhetoric with highly logical speech, obtain esoteric knowledge (Kiefer, 1972), and are diplomats (Kiefer, 1969). They are also credible *taumaas*, *imams* (spiritual leaders), *mangugubat* (healers), and professional experts in *Ilmu' Kamaasan*<sup>4</sup> (Indigenous Knowledge) in Semporna, Lahad Datu, and Sandakan. As Bara (2009) stresses that ideal *taumaas* are *hartawan* (generous), *bangsawan* (nobleman), *halimawan* (courageous), and *ilmawan* (knowledgeable), and noticed by Jundam (2006) that they are considered a man of all seasons holding the executive, legislative, and judiciary authority in the Suluk communities. However, given this limited literature on instinctual leadership roles for the informal leaders or *taumaas*; thus, based on the aforementioned statements, exploring the instinctual leadership roles of the informal *taumaas* of the Suluk communities on the East Coast of Sabah, Malaysia, is noteworthy.

## Materials and Methods

This research employed a qualitative method. From September 2 to 12, 2020, in-depth interviews were used to investigate the informal roles of *taumaas* in the Sabah East Coast Suluk community in Malaysia. Open-ended questions, propounded in the local language (Sinug) alongside informal conversations were used to gather rich data. Participants' observations were documented throughout the research period, providing valuable contextual details beyond the informant accounts. These observations could include details about nonverbal communication, interactions within the community, and the physical environment where interviews took place. Nine informants were selected through snowball sampling and provided informed consent to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere, allowing participants to openly share their expertise, wisdom, and experiences in their local language. Secondary data collected from books, journals, and research was imperative in this study. Smartphones, audio recorders, and notebooks were used during the interviews with the consent of the informants. Notes were also taken as records during the interview process to ensure the conformity of the information gained from the informants. While brief personal notes were taken during the interviews to aid in recollection and data analysis, the primary focus remained on the participant's verbal responses.

The qualitative data collected from the interviews was subjected to thorough analysis. The transcribed interviews were carefully reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the informal leaders' role. Thematic Analysis was executed following Braun and Clarke's (2012) prescribed outline,

<sup>4</sup>Ilmu' Kamaasan is equivalent to the modern concept of Indigenous Knowledge (IK). Prior to the coming of the Muslim missionaries to the Suluk shores, the kamaasan used the term "panghati kamaasan"; panghati refers to knowledge, and kamaasan refers to their ancestors.

which encompassed familiarizing the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and ultimately producing the report, while Goleman et al.'s Affiliative Leadership Theory 2009 serving as the guiding framework for this study. According to Goleman et al. (2009), Affiliative Leadership deals with resolving conflict by transforming the problem into a state of harmony by understanding the needs of the followers, focusing on the positive, allowing flexibility, and encouraging creativity. As this theory highlights the importance of resolving conflict, it is valuable to consider traditional methods employed within the Suluk community.

The Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM) is an imperative strategy to resolve conflicts; it is also considered a significant lifestyle of the Suluk people (Danial et al., 2024). Its importance as part of the *adat* (customs) is one of the techniques to mediate the different disputes in the Suluk community. A comparative framework using the SIM is necessary to validate the ways of resolving conflict, as mentioned in Affiliative Leadership.

The study followed ethical guidelines for interviews, with informants receiving a formal letter seeking permission and consent. Participation was voluntary and had the option to avoid uncomfortable questions. The interview protocol aimed to ensure sensitivity and respect, recording accuracy while maintaining confidentiality. Transparent communication, voluntary consent, sensitivity to informants' comfort, and data confidentiality were all considered to ensure the integrity and ethical soundness of the research process. These principles collectively ensure the integrity and soundness of the research process.

## Results and Discussion

This study explores the concept of Suluk *taumaas* within the Sabah East Coast Suluk community in Malaysia. The research reveals two distinct categories of Suluk *Taumaas*: informal *taumaas* and formal *taumaas*. The *taumaas* uphold the practice of the *adat* as the primary law and Shariah as the ideal law (Rasul, 2009). Nonetheless, formal *taumaas* follow the legal authority's guidelines, while informal *taumaas* are guided by moral law through oral law or tradition. In some cases, *taumaas* exist in one community and work as partners. The informal *taumaas* is focused on the undocumented constituents and sometimes extends his service to walk-in clients, regardless of status.

Based on fieldwork and observations, informal *taumaas* instantly stand for three situations, namely, (1) when the community encounters problems like social disorder, (2) when the formal *taumaas* (Ketua Kampung) is a non-Suluk, and (3) when there is a newly organized Suluk-dominated community based on fieldwork and observations. Traditionally, he is accepted by a community headed by the elders of a different clan. As soon as he is pledged to serve, the informal *taumaas* automatically gain respect from the people like the Ketua Kampung. He takes his oath to perform duties and responsibilities for a lifetime.

Informant Three explained:

*Amanah ini tiyukbal sin Tuhan, in hati niya bukun ini nagupis biya' sin parinta magkapasaw in kawajiban. In amanah ini kari asali di kamu'. Tanggung jawab namu' in amanah ini sampay lupa' punud. In had niya, simapa kami ha ngan sin Allah, kawajiban way hugnaan.*

[TRANSLATION]

This responsibility is entrusted by Allah, which means we hold no office like in the government, subject to expiration. Responsibility is something innate in us. We bear the trust till death. Nevertheless, our oath is in the name of Allah— a perpetual obligation.

As long as *taumaas* can still perform his duty and responsibilities, he will serve the community to the last breath. This *amanah* or trust, responsibility, and loyalty are inspired by devotion to Allah, a servanthood leadership that serves the community unconditionally. His responsibilities are a part

of his worship and devotion to Allah. This innate leadership starts within him and his family. No one taught him the leadership system; it naturally evolved from day-to-day practices later handed down to the new generation.

Informant One articulated:

*In pagtaumaas ini kakari asali sarta' bukan siya nadauhat daying ha manga pagiskul. In panghagad ku kakari asaali nagkahinang sin satiyap taumaas ibanna sin ingat kapandayan kiyahindu' sin maumaas turun daying ha kamaumaasan nila.*

[TRANSLATION]

This natural leadership was not gained from any academic institution. Each *taumaas* naturally experienced it, plus the knowledge and skills humbly taught by our parents from their forefathers.

The *fitrah* (instinctual) leadership experience of the *taumaas* evolves and develops in every case he handles, making him/her more expert in his field. Most *taumaas* (informants) have lower education in the formal institution. However, *taumaas* possesses expertise in *Ilmu' Kamaasan* (Indigenous Knowledge) and is highly influential and commendable in his endeavors. *Taumaas* leadership is innate and comes naturally from his passion for helping people.

It is fascinating to observe that informal *taumaas*, unlike formal ones, do not receive compensation from the government or any other sector to support their administration. Instead, they rely on the practice of *sadakka*, a voluntary charity prescribed by Shariah Law. Despite having no official appointment or financial compensation, informal *taumaas* are more willing to fulfill their obligations to Allah as part of their worship. They are committed to spending their resources to resolve conflicts and promote community development. These selfless and non-political services are a testament to informal leaders' essential role in the community. It is consistent with Rosyati's (2009) observation, which highlights the impact of informal *taumaas* on inspiring positive change.

### **Affiliative Leadership vis a vis Suluk Taumaas**

Goleman et al. (2009) emphasize that Affiliative Leadership includes valuing the emotional needs of followers. It usually promotes harmony within the community, resolving conflict, connecting people, valuing the emotional needs of his followers, and patronizing positive energy and creativity. Affiliative Leadership aligns with the concept of the Suluk informal *taumaas*, who builds trust and emotional connections within the community. As a man of all seasons (Jundam, 2009), the informal *taumaas* demonstrate empathy and understanding towards community members. This emotional connection is crucial for effective leadership. It aligns with the principles of Affiliative Leadership, which fulfills various important instinctual roles within the community as part of his *fitrah* as *Khalifah* (vicegerent) on earth. These instinctual roles are enumerated below.

### **Tabiat Kariasali 1: Promoting Harmony through the Informal Taumaas**

An affiliative leader prioritizes promoting harmony and cultivating amicable interactions within the team (Goleman et al., 2009). In the case of the Suluk community, harmony can be promoted through the crucial role of the informal *taumaas* in cultivating harmony within a community aside from implementing mediation intervention, fostering individual connections, and emphasizing the interconnectedness between people and nature. The section highlights several narratives of being protectors of the Suluk *adat*, stewards of the land, and providers and caretakers of the community.

#### **Protectors of the Suluk *adat***

The daily social interaction, informal conversations, and gestures of the informal *taumaas* demonstrate the principles of the *adat* (customs). *Adat* flows naturally in every movement of the informal *taumaas*, whether in private or public places.

Informant Three discussed:

*Tabiya' yaun, in in tingka laku sin taumaas dumagbus duun kaniya in adat sin bangsa ta sarayaw-rayaw. Dan ini hika upi sin kaanakan, mabuhí' ha atay nila in adat. Marayaw ini hikapusaka' kanila. Pasal in manga ini hinang marayaw, hipatanyag sin bangsa ta hikasannang sin katan.*

[TRANSLATION]

I am sorry, but the proud customs of our group shall be manifested in every gesture of the *taumaas*, ensuring that our descendants will follow in their footsteps and that these customs will be ingrained in their hearts. It is an honor to inherit these customs, as they represent a remarkable legacy to be proud of and are deeply meaningful to all.

Preserving customs, culture, and traditions plays a significant role in informal *taumaas*. He is responsible for championing the unwritten custom, culture, and tradition handed down by their forefathers. He is also mandated to initiate a program that promotes the traditions. Traditionally, the *adat* law is unwritten. Fortunately, informal *taumaas* are committed to saving the customary laws.

Informant Seven shared:

*Bang awnna manga kalalamihan ha kauman bihan, manga ginisan parakala, na' taumaas bihan in maguhanan. Subay kita kakitaan sin manga anak apu, na kumug sila bihan.*

[TRANSLATION]

For every community occasion, *taumaas* will automatically lead. It is good to be witnessed by our offspring; they are happy for that.

White teeth are seen in Informant Seven's smile, explaining that *taumaas* always support community activities. Since informal *taumaas* is an *adat* leader, he is responsible for officiating significant cultural practices in the community. The activities include *pag sunnat* (circumcision), *pagtiyaun* (wedding), *pagtammat* or *khatam* ceremony<sup>5</sup>, *panulak bala*<sup>6</sup>, *pagduwaa* (thanksgiving prayer), *pagmaulud* (birthday of the Prophet), and *hailaya* (Islamic feasts).

*Adat* is like religion, uncontested energy that invites camaraderie and solidarity among the ethnic society that connects their heart. The main task of customary law is to establish sustainable peace, harmony, and community prosperity (Kiefer, 1969) that brings happiness. In the chemistry between the *adat* and religious practices, the informal *taumaas* successfully sustain the healthy relationship between the families and clans in the community, including the past, present, and future generations.

### Stewards of the Land

Environmental preservation and protection are also among the affairs of the informal *taumaas*. The headman leads the villagers in planting trees and cleaning the seashores as they traditionally believe that the green and clean community will be the target of the *malaikat* (angels) to be visited every *fajr* (dawn). *Malaikat* will bring an abundance of blessings, wealth, and good health. On the contrary, a dirty environment will bring *bala'* (bad luck).

Informant Three warned:

*Ayaw kita majaluhaka' ha manga Katumbu-tumbuhan, kaabatan kita.*

[TRANSLATION]

Do not be harsh to nature; it may cause mild sickness.

As a case in point, cutting big trees is strictly forbidden in the Suluk tradition, and planting herbs is highly encouraged. Based on the *taumaas* customary belief, cutting big trees disrespects nature and is only advisable if it harms the community. Dislocating the natural formation of unique rocks is strictly prohibited; hence, preserving nature is strictly observed. Suluk believes there is a strong connection between human beings and nature, and by preserving and protecting the environment,

<sup>5</sup>Thanksgiving after memorizing the entire chapters of the Qur'an.

<sup>6</sup>Panulak Bala' refers to the ritual every Wednesday of the month of Safar. According to Bara (2009) Panulak Bala'. It is literally "preventing the wrath of Allah," a practice inherited from before the early years of Islam in Sulu.

balance and harmony in the community will be established. For them, it serves as peace advocacy—a principal interest of the informal *taumaas*.

Habib Informant Nine explained:

*Bang usibaan in manga paniyanum, way manusiya' mabuhí. Iban in manga gamut kahuy yan, ubat matadjam, kagunahan sin sagannap manusiya. Adapun bang way parsugpatanta mahantap iban sin panghinanum di' kita umuntayaw.*

[TRANSLATION]

Human beings cannot survive without the plants. Herbal is valuable medicine, and human beings need it. People need to establish healthy relationships with nature for them to survive.

Informant Nine chews betel nuts while explaining that nature is significant to the life of human beings. Most of the herbal experts in the community are *taumaas*. Suluk still preserves the *Ilmu' Kamaasan* (Indigenous Knowledge) of herbal medicine.

### Community Providers and Caretakers

As mentioned earlier, “*maas*,” translated as ‘parent’ consists primarily of family members and relatives of the informal *taumaas*. As part of the community’s tradition, the Suluk practices *pagpajamu* (open house), which welcomes all to partake in the blessings the Almighty bestows. Over time, this practice has allowed the less fortunate neighbors to share these blessings. The informal *taumaas* have established affiliations with authorities to develop livelihood initiatives to improve the lives of the Suluk communities.

Informant Four explained:

*In mattan taumaas amuna in lumawag siya dan makabaak manuk mandagan ha di' niyapa masupa' in anak ista'.*

[TRANSLATION]

The genuine leader finds ways to have the tail of a rooster for his people; he chews the tail of a small fish.

Informant Seven discussed:

*Ama' sin kauman in taumaas, mangaku gaus siiya ha tindug Niya. Ibadat niya salaggu'-laggu'. In tumabang ha kiyasusahan pahala', ma'lum in bunga niya sulga'. Paglipuas sin kasulutan puas hati siya.*

[TRANSLATION]

*Taumaas* is a father of the community, sponsoring his needy followers. It is a vital part of his worship. Helping those in trouble is virtue; the fruits are in paradise. After resolving the disputes, the feeling of satisfaction is unexplainable.

Informant Eight advised:

*Ayaw busung, bingit in dihilan kanila, bukun ista'.*

[TRANSLATION]

Please give them a hook instead of fish.

Informant Four and Eight are two leaders who have parallel perspectives on leadership. Informant Four understands the importance of caring for the well-being of his community and recognizes that a true leader cannot rest while their neighbors go hungry. He believes that a leader’s primary responsibility is to find ways to improve the lives of those around them. On the other hand, Informant Eight believes that empowerment through sustainable livelihood programs is critical to building a better community. By providing resources and support to those in need, he aims to reduce family problems and harmful activities in the community. Informant Four and Eight have unique insights into what it means to be a leader, and their contributions are invaluable to their community. This form of leadership is deeply rooted in the drive to sacrifice one’s time, resources, and even one’s life for the betterment of the community. This unwavering commitment engenders profound loyalty from the people. Consequently, the deep-seated connection between the leader and the followers fosters a cohesive community bound by social solidarity.

Moreover, the account of Informant Seven paints a vivid picture of a man who, as a paternal figure within the community, dedicates himself to serving his constituents with a profound sense of *ikhlas* (sincerity). His position as the village headman is not a title but a role he naturally assumed. It is worth noting that the informal *taumaas* aspirations are not focused on personal gain but on the unexpected blessings Allah may bestow in the hereafter. The leadership of Informant Seven exemplifies servanthood, drawing attention to the significant connection between spirituality and governance. This connection is particularly important to the lifestyle of the Suluk or Tausug community.

Informant Nine stated:

<i>Bang kaw nagdihil pagkaun, piyakaun mu in Tuhan.</i>	[TRANSLATION] When you share food, you feed God.
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Informant Nine delivers an eloquent message with a gentle tone, conveying poetic wisdom. Notably, Suluk employs *parail* (narrative metaphor) to communicate a profound message effectively (Danial et al., 2024). Although God does not require sustenance, Informant Nine's statement illustrates the power of *parail*. Sharing food with another person is an act of servitude, an expression of devotion to God through service to humanity. The informal *taumaas* are exemplary models for the community to emulate.

### ***Tabiat Kariasali 2: Addressing Community Social Vices through Flexibility and Collaboration***

An affiliative leader's strength lies in their flexible and collaborative approach (Goleman et al., 2009). Informal *taumaas* are instrumental in guiding young individuals toward overcoming social vices and being servants of peace through faith. Based on the narratives, they must guide the Suluk communities in walking under the light of peace through advice while integrating them into the community. Since mediation is a primary mandate of the informal leader, it must always be flexible; it can be trusted, speedy, and culturally sensitive. The section highlights several narratives of being servants of peace, guardians of transformative justice, and peacemakers of the culture of peace.

#### **Servants of Peace through Faith**

In the Suluk *adat* principle, the separation of the church and state is not applicable. The *Langgal* (mosque) is considered the most appropriate place to mend broken ties (Danial et al., 2024, pp. 100-104). Kiefer (1969) notes that the mosque is typically supervised by the *taumaas*. According to Danial et al. (2024, p. 101), the *langgal* is viewed as a neutral ground for the disputing parties to come together and seek forgiveness; it is a place where the mediator calls for peace, seeking solace in the house of Most Merciful Allah. Furthermore, the mosque represents more than just a place of worship — it serves as a beacon of hope for those seeking to resolve their conflicts (Danial et al., 2024, p. 101).

Informal *taumaas* are responsible for religious activities; some are among the *kauman* (village) *imams*, preferably the community's *imam*. He is considered the most expert in terms of customary and Islamic law and, as such, responsible for replying to Islamic inquiries. Furthermore, the informal *taumaas* may tap the Islamic teacher to discuss the issues and concerns and can assign Islamic scholars to deliver *khutba'* (sermon) during Friday prayer. He also appoints religious positions such as *imam* and *bilal* to serve religious activities; the *imam* leads the congregation in the mosque, and the *bilal* calls the faithful to perform the prayer. Through this authority, community members automatically respect the newly appointed *imam* and *bilal* in honor and obedience to the final decision of the informal *taumaas*.



Informant Two enlightened:

*In kahanungan iban maruwa di' tuud yan mabutas, amuna in kamaksuran sin pagtaumaas niya. Ayaran niya in tau niya biya' sin pagayad niya ha kabuhi' niya.*

[TRANSLATION]

Peace and dignity are indivisible and represent the principal objectives of his leadership. He safeguards his people in the same manner that he protects his own life.

Informant Three added:

*In putti sin pagparinta amuna in kahanungan tumagna' halawum jantung sahingga sumaplag pa upat pidju sin kauman. Madauhat ini siya halawum lingkungan sin agama Islam.*

[TRANSLATION]

The essence of governance is that peace starts at the heart and eventually spreads to every corner of the community. This will be possible in the realm of Islam.

Islam means peace. As a spiritual expert, informal *taumaas* must guide his people in walking under the light of peace. In this endeavor, he and his followers eliminate negative energies in their hearts and community and focus on a positive light. By positive vibes, man can embrace genuine peace. At the same time, informal *taumaas* is responsible for the implementation of *Sara' Agama* (Religious Law) in search for *karayawan* (goodness), both on earth and in the hereafter (Kiefer, 1969). People are expected to live in a harmonious village where life balances spirituality and simple living. The informant further explains below.

Informant Seven stated:

*In pagtimbang sin dunya ahirat makapatutug iban makapahanung ha manusiya. Maita' ini kalagihan? Sabab bang lumabi in pagdunya daying pagahirat makakangi' sin kabuhi'. Ha dugaing bissara, bang lumabina in kakuyagan daying sin had niya, na' malawa'na in hidayat sin kabuhi' niya. In mattan kakuyagan tuput kabaakan duun ha nagpapasaddap kaw sin dunya' sa' sarta' hadir duun kaimu in Tuhan iban sin hidayat niya.*

[TRANSLATION]

Balancing the material world and spirituality would stabilize and calm the individual. Why is there a need for this? Investing much in the worldly life while ignoring spirituality would lead to a miserable life. In other words, an individual's life will be misguided when happiness is over its limit. You can only find genuine happiness when you enjoy this world with the presence and guidance of the Almighty.

Suluk or Tausug, as Muslims, believe that position and wealth are just world things that will not last long. It will not give any benefits unless they are used for spiritual intention to support his fellowmen's needs regardless of belief and tribal affiliation. For the Suluk, happiness is not how big the wealth collected, and the high position is; it is how serving the needy people for the sake of God is called *kasilasa* (affectionate love). Further, the happiness of each Muslim should not be confined to himself alone.

Informant One enlightened:

*In Muslim magtaimanghud. In manga kamaasan natu' magsawu-sawu sila tubig iban uyum katawa. Unu in maana niya yadtu? Bang kau makapasawu lidjiki', na' Nakapakuyagna kau ha tau. Bang mu nakapakuyag in taimanghud mu, lasahun nila kau iban di' nilana kau pasaran.*

[TRANSLATION]

Muslim is brother to another Muslim. Our forefathers told us to share two things. Share water and share a smile. What does that mean? If you share your blessing, eventually, you share happiness with everyone. When you make your brothers happy, they will love you and never wish to leave you alone.

The symbolic water and smile bring happiness to a brother in spirituality. The exchange of blessings of both physical and emotional needs strengthens brotherhood among Suluk. Spiritual journey fuels this commendable tradition. A person who loves God will be loved by His servants. God will love a person who loves God's servants. The *pagbawgbug* (instinctual solidarity) tradition of the

Suluk is a natural service. It is an act of loving God through His servants. Those who reach this stage will embrace inner peace and harmony with their fellow brothers and sisters in humanity.

Informant Eight discussed:

*In biyn sin kamaasan, pabawgbugan in tuw parakala' Bang kabawgbugan in tuw parakala' yan madauhat niya in kahanungan halawum jantung niya, kabatukan niya in Maha Sussi Tuhan niya, iban kalasahan siya sin sagannap manusiya', inshaAllah. In tuw parakala' yan amuna in qauli, fi'li, iban qalbi.*

[TRANSLATION]

Our forefather says that when someone upholds these three things, he/she will embrace inner peace, find his/her Allah, he/she be loved by all people by God's will. These three things are word, action, and heart.

In a soothing tone, Informant Eight imparts his wisdom on *qauli*, *fi'il*, and *qalbi* concepts. To him, gentle words, kind actions, and a compassionate heart are not just ideals to aspire to but are principles that must be upheld at all times. As the researcher savors the native Suluk dishes prepared by Informant Eight's wife, Informant Eight emphasizes the importance of performing good deeds with pure intentions. Such selfless acts help others and bring inner peace and contentment. In fact, by practicing these noble deeds, one can find God in their hearts. He believes an open and loving heart is essential to connect with anyone needing help. Such a heart is filled with love and empathy, bringing inner joy and satisfaction.

#### **Guardians of Transformative Justice through Nasihat and Community Integration**

Informal *taumaas* play a crucial role in Suluk communities, serving as custodians of transformative justice through a combination of advice and community involvement. According to the informants, their actions are guided by Islamic principles, focusing on addressing social issues, promoting peace, and enhancing the well-being of community members. Goleman et al. (2009, pp. 4-5) support these roles as being rooted in affiliative leadership, emphasizing the understanding of underlying causes of social problems such as emotional distress. They offer support through spiritual counseling and practical assistance, creating an environment where justice, peace, and compassion prosper.

Informant Four stated:

*Masusa kita ha kabataan magkalakkuan sin bukun maamu, hikakangi' sin pamikil nila iban palangay nila. In muna mahinang namu' amuin ta'gahan sila daying ha kakahinang yadtu. Kalagihan tuun in mapatumtum sila iban kapanduan sila daying ha waktu pa waktu.*

[TRANSLATION]

We are concerned about the harmful activities of the youth that may affect their mental health and behavior. The first thing to do is to prevent them from engaging in these activities. We need to remind and guide them from time to time.

Social vices affect the mental health and behavior of individuals. Drug addiction, alcohol, and gambling spoil the peace and order in the Suluk community. These may affect the relationships between individuals and their families. Therefore, informal *taumaas* require two vital strategies to transform this damaging practice into productive ones: *nasihat* (advice) and flexibility strategies. As expounded by the informants the informal *taumaas* are considered the father of the community, and they take their part by giving *nasihat* to young people and concerned individuals to stop the worthless activities that occur in the community gradually. He allows his people to become part of the community peacebuilders instead of blaming individuals who are victims of social vices. This flexibility strategy is a clever move to transform the victim into a productive community member.

Informant Seven expressed:

*Bang wairuun hinang ma'siyat ha kauman, kayakinan sin awn kahanungan iban kama'muran sin kauman.*

[TRANSLATION]

The absence of social vices in the community guarantees a harmonious and proper community.

If the issue remains unresolved, the informal *taumaas* report to the authority and coordinate with the *Ketua Kampung* (official *taumaas*). Affiliative leadership suggests collaboration be applied (Goleman et al., 2009). As a father of the community, the best option for the informal *taumaas* is to advise his children.

Informant One shared:

*Mahalga' tuud ha pagtaumaas in hatihun in kalagihan sin tau ta, biya'na sin manga tiyatawu' ha atay nila, iban na bihan sin manga kalagihan balanjaun nila."*

[TRANSLATION]

Understanding follower's needs, including emotional burdens and financial challenges, is indispensable to effective leadership.

The informal *taumaas* strives to understand his followers' needs and concerns, including emotional burdens and financial difficulties. As the Informant One explains, "to lead effectively, one must possess an awareness of followers' emotional burdens and financial constraints, which significantly influence their overall well-being and performance." Ideally, the *taumaas* initiate ways to support the livelihood of their community. This noble endeavor aims to transform individuals and families into better citizens of the country. These citizens or the people regard the *taumaas* as *maas* (parent) figures. As the custodian of the community, he diligently oversees the welfare of the populace, ensuring the maintenance of peace, economic stability, and spiritual advancement.

### Peacemakers for the Culture of Peace

Mediation in Suluk is called *pagpatiut*, *pagsalassay*, or *pagsulut*. *Pagpatiut* means in the middle—informal *taumaas* as mediator impartially at the middle of the two parties to facilitate the settlement. In Hassan et al.'s (1994) work, *pagsalassay* is from the word *salassay*, which means fixing, arranging, or settling. *Pagsulut* is from the word *sulut*, which means "mutual agreement or harmony with others."

Mediation is a primary mandate of the informal leader. Suluk disputants choose their community leader to resolve their conflict since an informal leader is flexible, can be trusted, is speedy, and culturally sensitive, and his mediation process costs less. For them, informal *taumaas* is the most effective mediator for resolving their conflict.

Informant One expounded:

*In manga nagsasagga' di' yan pakain-pakain. Labi in tanam nila ri katu', ginisanna in parkala' dahun mari.*

[TRANSLATION]

Parties are not going anywhere. They are more comfortable here, bringing different cases.

The informal *taumaas* are known to mediate various disputes, including marital conflicts, land disputes, harassment, looting, and public disturbances. This can encompass disputes arising from situations such as sexual harassment, abduction, elopement, divorce, and indecency, as described by Durante et al. (2007) and supported by Jundam (2005) and Kiefer (1972). Informal *taumaas* are like formal *taumaas*, abstaining themselves from dealing with violent conflict. He recommends crime-related cases to higher authorities.

Informant Three shared:

*Apdal hitukbal in parakala' pagbunu' pa pulis, sila in labi tagakapatut magsalassay sin parakala' Sumagawa, maamu bang mapu'pu' iban mahalulay in parakala' ha di pa hakabaan.*

[TRANSLATION]

It is better to endorse violent conflict to the police, as they have more authority in dealing with the case. However, it would be more interesting if we could prevent or resolve the case at our level.

Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM) was the approach of the informal *taumaas* to resolve disputes. SIM employs *adat* and *Shariah* to resolve conflict (Danial et al., 2024). In some cases, the mediator applies a flexible approach for non-Suluk by adopting the disputant's *adat* in a particular process to achieve the mediation objective. However, the basic Suluk *adat* principles remain uncompromising during mediation, like avoiding bias and exposing *kasipugan* (disgraceful matters). According to Dino et al. (2023:51), "they (Suluk) will never allow themselves to be so dishonored." Suluk's Indigenous Mediation approach takes the problem into a *tabla*<sup>7</sup> (evenness) decision instead of seeking the truth. In *adat*, mediation has no party winners and losers (Jundam, 2006;). Finding a solution will be the center of the process instead of discussing the root cause. The aim is to protect the dignity of disputants (Danial et al., 2024; Jundam, 2006). As a mediator, the informal *taumaas* will not make a decision. He helps the parties to find the solution. However, he suggests a mutual agreement.

Informant Four stated:

*Hatihun maunyak in khalan. Ampa ukaban lawang. Hasupaya sila (nagsagga') makabatuk kasulutan ha kainginan nila. Silara tuput in makapasampulna' sin kasalassayan.*

[TRANSLATION]

A deep understanding of the issues concerned is needed. Finding ways. So that they (parties) can reach the solution they desire, they are the right people to complete the settlement.

With sharp eyes, Informant Four explained the significance of the deep investigation. Informal *taumaas*, as a mediator, tries to resolve the conflict as much as possible before the situation worsens. Affiliative Leadership theory suggests that the most effective way to resolve conflict is to have an early intervention before the conflict worsens (Goleman et al., 2009). He reinstalls the broken relationship between individuals, families, and clans. Traditionally, informal *taumaas* combines mediation counseling for conflict prevention. According to Mohd Fuad Salleh (2015), mediation counseling is a new mediation method that combines mediation and counseling in the caucus meeting for better, more effective results. However, since time immemorial, the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM) has already practiced mediation counseling.

Furthermore, SIM strategies include group consensus, good relationships, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, win-win solution, and preservation of dignity, known as *martabbat*. Its strategies are traditional teaching, storytelling, face-to-face meetings, respect, saving face, relationship, interconnectedness, prayer, spirituality, recounting facts, emotion, white lies, women's intervention, and symbolism. Women's intervention and symbolism are considered unique. Traditionally, informal *taumaas* tap his wife or sister to intervene in the high-tension issue, especially regarding violent conflict mediation.

Informant Three explained:

*In bangsa patima' makapahaggut sila ha pasu' sin parsagaan. Ha adat sin Tausug, piyagaaddatan sarta' hiyahahalgaan nila in kababaihan, iban kasisipugan ha kausugan di' sila tumabuk sin pangayu' sin kababaihan magsulut.*

[TRANSLATION]

The intervention of the women in the violent conflict mediation would cool down the atmosphere of the conflict. In Suluk culture, men pay respect and high value to women, and it is considered shameful to turn down the women's request for peace.

<sup>7</sup>*Tabla*, a strategy for resolving disputes without declaring a winner or loser, is a practical and effective approach compared to finding the truth. It prevents embarrassment for the involved parties and avoids potential complications that trigger the *martabbat*.

It shows that women play a vital role in the mediation. On the other hand, women's *martabbat* is also a conservative element in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM). Women are a symbol of *martabbat*.

Symbolism is also considered a significant strategy in SIM. *Tampun maru* and *bangun* are among the symbols found in the SIM. The delay and or failure to provide the said symbols might trigger tension. On the contrary, they are also an antidote to the tension. The way of life of the Suluk people is heavily influenced by symbolism. It shapes their perspective and motivates them to preserve harmony and balance in life (Danial et al., 2024). The Suluk people view the object, social act, and language represented in symbols as complex methods utilized in the mediation process. In due course, it is a contributing factor to settlement.

Moreover, cross-cultural laws, impartiality, party behavior, funds, access, and distance separation are the challenges the informal *taumaas* faces during mediation. *Taumaas* is flexible and does his best to find a win-win solution. Traditionally, non-Suluk walk-in parties admit themselves to informal *taumaas* for settlement. Nevertheless, cross-cultural laws were becoming a challenge for cultural sensitivity. Therefore, he taps culture experts to enlighten the cultural requirements for mediation. With impartiality, the SIM approach allowed impartial advice to both parties for a win-win solution. Advice may not be agreed by other experts (Khan et al., 2014; Quadan & Dan, 2010; Lestari, 2013; Straub, 1997) due to probable bias that may harm the mediation (Savun, 2008; Meek, 2000; Fisher, 1995; Stulberg, 1987; Young, 1967). Nevertheless, giving advice (Hadiati et al., 2020; Wall et al., 2001) and giving high respect to the elder's wisdom (Hadiati et al., 2002) are being observed in the mediation. Parties also encounter challenges during mediation, such as hiding dishonor, financial, and constraints. It notices that challenges are more towards informal *taumaas* than the parties. It illustrates that informal traumas have a significant role in mediation. Although financial matters are the party's responsibility, informal *taumaas* shoulders the expenses of the needy party. In addition, parties are responsible for hiding the issues that may trigger the *kasipugan* (shameful act), and informal *taumaas* is also obliged to keep the issues confidential.

SIM facilitated by the informal *taumaas* contributes to peace and harmony in Suluk communities in Sabah, including the non-Suluk neighboring communities. SIM prevents tension and conflict at the grassroots level.

### ***Tabiat Kariasali 3: Emotional Well-being and Spiritual Harmony***

When informal leaders demonstrate an affiliative style, they usually prioritize the communities' emotional needs, utilizing empathy as a critical tool (Goleman et al., 2009, p. 5). Counseling and spiritual activities are both integral programs of the informal *taumaas* aimed at meeting the emotional well-being and spiritual harmony of the Suluk communities. The section highlights several narratives as counselors supporting emotional well-being, stewards of the land, and providers and caretakers of the community.

#### **Counselors of Emotional Support**

Being a counselor is part of the instinctual role of the *taumaas* in the Suluk communities; as such, listening to the social conditions faced by the members is his utmost responsibility. Drawing from the interview, walk-in community members are voluntarily accepted by the informal *taumaas* for counseling. Suluk communities who experience relationship difficulties, relationship violence, and physical abuse can share or report their sentiments to the informal *taumaas*. As explained by Informant Five, the *taumaas*' listening skills help ease stress and heal anxiety. Additionally, to protect the identity of the community member/s, parties can expect confidentiality; hence, they keep coming to informal *taumaas* due to their discreetness, sensitivity, attention, and free charge. His sincerity in giving attention to his client is a natural attribute of being the father of the community.

Moreover, the word counseling might be unknown to the informal *taumaas*. However, he is adopting counseling techniques with or without knowledge since this is innate in his position. His attentiveness and love of listening to the problems of his followers are a big help in easing their pains and finding a way to resolve depression. The client slowly calms down, with peace of mind restored, allowing them to resume their daily life more productive than before.

Informant Five explained:

*In dumungug, humati, iban numanam ha sukkal sin hambuuk manusiya, hambuuk yan siya karayawan dakula. Gumaan in parasahan niya mabu'gat, sahingga umuli'na inut-inut laung ta bihan.*

[TRANSLATION]

Listening, understanding, and feeling the sentiment of an individual is a virtue. It comforts his burden and eventually heals the pain.

Informant Five added:

*Ukab in lawang dan ha manga sila magkalagihan hatihun. Agad ini ha manga ibadat ta.*

[TRANSLATION]

The door is open to anyone who seeks empathy. It is part of our worship.

Finally, as a counselor, the free service is a part of his worship of God and responsibility to his people. By all moral means, the informal *taumaas*, as a counselor, will do his best to help his clients. Love and harmony are his contentment. Informal *taumaas'* clients are his relatives, neighbors, and friends.

#### **Tabiat Kariasali 4: Creativity in Education and Healthcare**

An informal *taumaas* demonstrates creative dedication in advancing their community's academic and healthcare. It exemplifies the esteemed role of informal *taumaas* in safeguarding the future and well-being of their community. The section highlights several narratives as educators of tradition and faith and also as spiritual healers of the Suluk communities.

##### **Educators of Tradition and Faith**

The informal *taumaas*, religious groups, teachers, and parents work together to support the *lihal*, *madrasah* (Islamic school), and alternative learning centers. Islamic education is a spiritual and moral obligation of the Suluk community elders to maintain and enhance Islamic education in the community without compensation (Tan, 2010). There is no external budgetary support except the small donation of the parents.

Informant Seven enlightened:

*Awn way makatabang katu, in manga ini kawajiban subay mapaintul ta bihan in kaanakan. Kalagihan ta sila makaingat.*

[TRANSLATION]

With or without external support, we must support our children. We need them to be educated.

*Lihal* is a home-based Qur'an and values education. In this traditional practice, Suluk children are trained to read the holy Qur'an and are given daily ethics instructions. Informal *taumaas* organizes the mass *pagtammam* in honor of the holy Qur'an and conduct its celebration for the learners. It is a great pride for the parents and community to cherish the celebration. A person who memorizes the Qur'an is called a *hafiz*. Whether the *hafiz* is young or old, the community respects them. *Hafiz's* integrity is popular among Suluk in Sabah. Memorizing the Holy Qur'an has been practiced for hundreds of years as part of the *adat* of the Suluk (Majul, 1999). Each member of the Suluk family shall have at least one who has memorized or read all the pages of the Holy Qur'an with clear and correct pronunciation. According to Tan (2010), the impression of reading the Qur'an has a colorful psychological impact.

Aside from the *lihal*, the informal *taumaas* organizes community-based *madrasah* as requested by the parents. This informal Islamic education is open to children and adults in special classes. The subjects are Arabic, *Akhlaq* (manner), *Hadith* (tradition of the Prophet), and *Seerah* (history of the Prophet). The allowance for the teachers may come from the parents or are sponsored by good-hearted individuals.

Informant One informed:

*Pinturu' namu' in kaanakan ha bay sahingga hiyatud namu' pa madrasah hasupaya lumuag in pagpanuntut nila ilmu. Di' kami makagaus dumihil mahalga' alta, iban wairuun ganti' sin pagpanuntut ilmu.*

[TRANSLATION]

We mold our children at home and send them to the *madrasah* to enhance their learning environment. We cannot afford to give them valuable properties, yet there are no alternatives to education.

The alternative learning center is also available in some Suluk communities. It is an educational program for the undocumented and stateless children in Sabah. The pupils are taught to read and write as well as good morals. The said center adapted a regular school textbook for learning so that they could follow the regular school pupils. The number of pupils is growing every year. Some non-government organizations help the informal *taumaas* improve the curriculum and volunteer themselves to teach the kids. Parents are very supportive of this program. They are not asking for more; at least essential reading and writing would be enough for their kids.

Informant Four shared:

*Di' ku kakitaan in susungun nila. Malaggu' in pagsarang sukul sin kamaasan nila ha hal ini. Sumagawa, puas sin hindu' kanila ini, kalagihan nila in kamahilan hasupaya sila majatu.*

[TRANSLATION]

I cannot see their future. Poor kids. Their parents are thankful for the initiative. Nevertheless, after this primary literature, they need some skills.

The people's community education initiatives such as the *lihal* program, *madrasah*, and alternative learning center aim to combat illiteracy and switch on the hope of the children to live better as members of the human society. They would have the right to embrace the love of peace and compassion, as they exist as members of the human family.

### Spiritual Healers

Informal *taumaas* provides creative health care through traditional healing and herbal medicine. Health issues are significant in every Suluk community, especially during the pandemic. The role of the informal *taumaas* in this matter is vital. As mentioned earlier, the informal *taumaas* is versatile. He can be a headman at the same time as being a religious man, a healer, and so on. Although not all informal *taumaas* are *mangungubat* (healer), almost all Suluk *mangungubat* are community leaders. *Taumaas* is gifted with esoteric knowledge. As *mangungubat*, he is a specialist in the unseen world of the spirit (Kiefer, 1969). He is entrusted to protect and heal the patients from the attack of dark spirits like *panghinang-hinang* (sorcery), *sagda*<sup>8</sup>, and *abat*<sup>9</sup>. He also leads the *panulak bala*<sup>10</sup>. The Suluk believes *pagpajamu* (open house) and prayer could heal the community's *panglangu* (pandemic) strike. Charity and alms are positive energies that push away negative energy and illness.

<sup>8</sup>A mild sickness caused by a deceased parent, relative, or friend commenting on the living person.

<sup>9</sup>A mild sickness caused by the deceased person or evil spirit.

<sup>10</sup>An annual traditional practice of the Suluk, *taumaas* brings the members of the community to the shore for bathing to clean physically and emotionally, and sharing food.

Informant Three discussed:

*In pagpajamu hikatulak siya sin manga bala' ha kauman ha way naangan-angan. Bang kaw timukbal sin kasi, makatabuk kaw isab lasa. Maha Bassal in Tuhan Baying Murahun, in pagmura daying ha manga sipat Niya.*

[TRANSLATION]

Sharing of blessings helps to prevent unexpected *bala'* strikes to the community. When you give love, you will receive love too. Allah is Great and Most Generous, and generosity is among His attributes. He loves his generous servant. He protects those who share love.

Further, as *mangungubat*, the informal *taumaas* provides herbal medicine from their backyard to their patients within the territory. He also extends help to other tribes who ask for his assistance. Informal *taumaas* also transfers positive energies to his patient, called *tawal* (charm), from the words of God excerpts from the holy Qur'an.

Suluk still practices traditional healing and herbal medicine in Sabah. Although it has become an optional medicine for most, it is still a primary medicine for Suluk in the countryside. However, some Suluk elders prefer to refrain from using medicine from pharmacies. They also avoid instant and commercial foods like canned goods for health benefits. Organic food is much better for them.

Informant One stressed:

*Di'da kami maginum ubat daying ha kakaddayan yan, da daying ha duktul. Di' ta khatihan in manga pagadjal. Subay kita majaga, arakala manga bukun halal. Iban di' ta khatihan bang unu in manga piyaghinang. Sa' marayaw pa in manga gamut kahuy. Wairuun bihan hikakangi' niya. Daman makusug ba.*

[TRANSLATION]

We avoid consuming medicine from the pharmacy and doctor as we are unfamiliar with the process and prefer to be cautious about consuming only *halal* (lawful) substances. Since we do not know the drug's formula, herbal medicine is a better choice. We have experienced no side effects and believe herbal medicine is a healthier option.

### **Tabiat Kariasali 5: Balancing Community Needs with Limited Funds**

The informal *taumaas* is currently facing challenges, particularly in securing the funds necessary to sustain the community's essential requirements.

Informant Two stated:

*Ha tatkala' timindugna kita pagtaumaas, wajib ta tukuhun in kalahigan ha kauman. Muna-muna parakala' pagpsulut. In manga kawajiban ini magkalagihan syin.*

[TRANSLATION]

Once you take on leadership responsibilities, you are obliged to provide for the community's needs. Most especially when it comes to conflict resolution. These responsibilities need funds.

Mediation and literacy programs necessitate financial support. Informal mediators assume responsibility for covering the specified amount when a male party cannot promptly furnish the required funds for *tampun maru* (shield of honor) in an elopement. The *tampun maru* holds significance in honoring the female party, and any delay in its provision may engender further discord. Regrettably, these informal mediators lack a dedicated fund for this commendable endeavor. Another crucial element in mediation is *tambang*, often called blood money. In the case of *tambang*, the informal *taumaas* does everything possible to ensure that the shortfall amount is covered, playing a pivotal role in the successful culmination of the mediation process.

The informal *taumaas* in each Suluk community along the East Coast of Sabah oversees educational programs' financial requirements, including literacy initiatives. Regrettably, more funds are needed to support essential upkeep, such as regular salaries for educators and the procurement of school supplies. The assistance provided by the parents of the student is insufficient to uphold ongoing operations.



Furthermore, this study underscores that the role of the informal *taumaas* is concentrated in the social, economic, health, environmental, and education sectors. This critical role is reflected in Indonesia's Demak Regency, Central Java, and Sigalampang Julu. According to Rohman et al. (2021), village leaders promote economic development, improve health, preserve the environment, and advocate for social justice. Additionally, Daullay (2022) states that community participation in the governance of Sigalampang Julu is very active, encompassing economic, social, and political aspects of village governance. In the case of the Manobo IPs in Mindanao, according to Reginio (2024, pp. 62-64), the headman, known as *ubanen*, had a wide range of responsibilities within the community. These included economic governance, conflict resolution, managing relationships within and between tribes, leading ceremonies, dealing with matrimonial matters, and coordinating social activities. They often served as spiritual leaders, healers, and oracles. Their duties involved overseeing rituals such as starting the clearing and planting season, offering prayers for good harvests, conducting wedding ceremonies, and seeking divine help during difficult times. The multifaceted role of the *ubanen* is parallel to the concept of the man of all seasons, which is the Suluk leadership role.

## Conclusion

The significant instinctual role of informal *taumaas* within the Suluk communities in the Sabah East Coast, Malaysia, emerges as foundational pillars in promoting harmony and community development, but not limited to mediating conflicts, supporting emotional and spiritual well-being, and advancing educational and healthcare initiatives. Although not the same as the formal *taumaas*, they practice significant social influence because of their deep understanding and connection of *adat*, Islamic principles, and dedication to serving the Suluk communities. The informal *taumaas* possesses empathy, courage, and intelligence to perform activities like the traditional mediation process or SIM to emphasize the solution while respecting cultural practices and upholding the *martabbat*. Correspondingly, they also build stronger relationships, promote solidarity, and employ symbolic gestures by performing this role.

Additionally, by preserving the Suluk culture and traditions and safeguarding the unwritten *adat* laws and customs for future generations, informal *taumaas* are peacemakers facilitating settlement to achieve *sulut* or mutual agreement or harmony with others. As the headman of the Suluk communities, they are also the protectors of the *adat* and stewards of the land, actively preserving the culture and traditions, protecting measures, and demonstrating reverence for nature. As revered community providers and caretakers, they work collaboratively with institutions and slowly establish programs to improve living standards. Also, in nurturing emotional and spiritual well-being, the informal *taumaas* provides counseling services to those facing emotional challenges and incorporate activities to support spiritual growth as part of their responsibilities; accordingly, they are known healers, providers, and cultivators of peace through faith.

Moreover, they are known to be educators of tradition and faith, and as spiritual healers and carers, meeting the educational and healthcare needs is their way of preserving the cultural heritage of the entire Suluk community. Such initiatives promote Islamic education and basic literacy programs, contributing significantly to the overall well-being of the community.

Truly, *taumaas*, as a *nakura'* (leader) and a *sara'* (lawgiver) of the *adat* (customs), is a man of all seasons. He is not only a father of the community but also a mediator, counselor, religious leader, culture agent, educator, healer, and protector. Based on these roles, this study observes that the informal *taumaas* contributes to developing the community's social, religious, cultural, educational, environmental, and health aspects. Specifically, he resolves conflicts at the community level that result in a minimal number of cases submitted to the formal court and police. Informal *taumaas* had transformed the chaos into a state of harmony. He strengthened family relationships and social

connections. His voluntary counseling took care of the emotions of his followers. He prevented social vices like drug addiction and gambling while nurturing young people's positive behavior. He enriched and preserved Suluk's local culture, customs, and traditions as part of a national treasure. Although informal *taumaas* faces financial challenges, he supports alternative learning programs for undocumented or stateless children. Informal *taumaas* also empowered religious activities that enriched spirituality and moral obligations. He preserved nature and sustained a clean aquatic environment. He initiated healthcare activities while harmonizing man with nature in the *lungan* (village). *Lungan* is a small unit. However, it is significant to the entire country. The conflict and the development of the *lungan* affect a large portion of the country. The *lungan* relies upon the leadership of the headman. The sincere informal *taumaas* who serves and is aware of their role help the country to become a better nation.

Further, this study is significant for Suluk community leaders, their successors, and non-Suluk community leaders interested in exploring Suluk Indigenous Leadership as a benchmark. This paper will serve as an invaluable academic reference on the roles of informal *taumaas* in the Sabah East Coast Suluk community, providing insights and comprehensive analysis.

This study suggests that the authorities' official recognition and assistance of the informal *taumaas* is significant. The well-defined partnership between informal leaders and the government in security and human development is crucial for the community. It also suggests that the participation of the informal *taumaas* in the Mahkamah Anak Negeri official processes while maintaining the genuine aspects of *adat* is a critical factor in sustaining a harmonious community and preserving national culture, highlighting the urgency of cultural sustainability.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

### **AI Disclosure**

We declare that this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Hence, the content of this paper is original.

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