

PROGRAM REPORT :

GROUP 2: RELIGION & COSMOLOGIES

AMU3248 ATS3248 APG4248 Field methods in Anthropology and International Development (FMA) 2026

Programme Title	Student Research Projects – AMU3248 ATS3248 APG4248 Field methods in Anthropology and International Development Group 2: Religion and Cosmologies
Date	4 July – 21 July 2026
Fieldwork Period (SEACO, Segamat)	12 July – 15 July 2026
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Facilitators	Mohamad Khairul Azhar bin Ahmad Nur Ain binti Abd Rahman
Students	Alan Soby TC Bakhour Logan Bishop Jakayla Rogers Mo Shen Fenghe Han
Target Location	Segamat District, Johor (Covering the sub-districts of Sungai Segamat, Gemereh, Jabi, Chaah and Bekok)

1. Program Background & Objectives

This academic programme comprises the units AMU3248, ATS3248, and APG4248 is an annual initiative conducted through a collaboration between Monash University Australia (MUA), Monash University Malaysia (MUM), and the South East Asia Community Observatory (SEACO). The ethical conduct of this research has been approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee, Project No. 47825. For the FMA 2026 programme, 29



students from Monash University Australia (MUA) and 11 students from Monash University Malaysia (MUM) participated, making a total of 40 students. The programme is supervised by two Programme Coordinators, Associate Professor Dr. Narelle and Dr. Stefan Bächtold, with the support of 12 staff members from the South East Asia Community Observatory (SEACO), who serve as facilitators and coordinators to ensure the smooth implementation of fieldwork activities. The students are divided into several groups, with each group assigned to a specific research topic.

Through this programme, Monash University students are provided with opportunities to apply the theories learned in the classroom within real-world and dynamic community settings, thereby bridging the gap between academic knowledge and empirical realities. The main **objective** of implementing this programme is to:

- 1) Learn research methods through practical fieldwork experience.

SEACO serves as the programme's implementation partner by providing support in coordinating fieldwork activities, data collection, and community engagement and coordination with local communities.

Participants are invited to take part in the project as they are existing SEACO participants and members of the Segamat district community. The project aims to obtain community perspectives and experiences on several key topics, including:

- 1) Human and more-than-human relationships (animals, the environment, and objects)
- 2) Household structures and the management of everyday life in Malaysia
- 3) Sustainability, the environment, and climate change
- 4) Community Engagement: Understanding perspectives and representation
- 5) Religion / Cosmology
- 6) Traditional Medical Practices

Participation in the study involves either a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) or an in-depth interview lasting approximately 1 to 2 hours, focusing on one of the predetermined topics. Each FGD session involves 7 to 10 participants and is conducted during either morning or afternoon sessions. For in-depth interviews, sessions are conducted at a time and location mutually agreed upon and suitable for the participants. Data collection activities were conducted from 5 July 2025 to 8 July 2025.

Throughout the discussions and interviews, participants shared their perspectives on their communities, social and cultural aspects, personal beliefs, and, where relevant, information regarding objects or locations that were significant to the research topics.

2. Activities & Key Discussions

Generally, this programme will involve a focus group discussion (FGD) or in-depth interview session on one of the topics mentioned above in which participation is voluntary and participants are under no obligation to consent to participate. There will be two sessions for each day. One session will be held in the morning and one session will be held in the afternoon. There will be 7 to 10 respondents involved in each FGD session.

An FGD is a guided small group discussion that will take approximately 1 to 2 hours at a convenient location. An in-depth interview is a guided discussion between one participant and one student researcher, that will take place at a time and location convenient for the



respondent. Each interview will run from 1 to 2 hours. The length of your participation will be determined by what information that you would like to share with the researchers.

Participants will be asked on their insights about aspects of their community: social and cultural aspects, personal perceptions and beliefs, and anything else that is relevant. Participants also may like to share objects with the student researchers (e.g. medicine packets) and/or show the students some key points of interest in their local area (e.g. temples, waterfalls, etc). If participants choose to do this, the students will ask participants consent to take notes and photographs of these artifacts. Participants can freely decline their request if they prefer.

As for Group 2: Religion and Cosmologies, 7 sessions of FGD/ Interviews were held across 3.5 days of field work (12 July 2026 - 15 July 2026).

Day 1: Session 1 (Morning) - Indian Community in Bekok (Hindu Religion Practitioner)

1st session for Group 2 with the Indian community in *Bangunan Persatuan Kwongsi* in Bekok which was also joined by the academic supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Narelle. A total of 8 participants (2 Male & 6 Female) participated for the session which started with opening remarks by the SEACO facilitator and short introductory by all the students.

The FGD session started with a brief introduction of the topics and the participants were given 15 - 20 minutes to discuss and list out all the important events/ celebration/ checkpoint in an individual life as a Hindu practitioner. Once completed, the participants explained all the listed items on the mind map and the students asked further questions on the topics. Then, they were given stickers, and the students asked the participants to put the sticker on the most significant event for a Hindu practitioner individual before further questions were asked.

At the same time of the FGD activity in session, an in-depth interview was also conducted with the respondents by 2 of the students (1 as facilitator and 1 as note taker/ audio recorder). The students take turns to be interviewed with a set of questions different as compared to the questions to the FGD sessions.

The sessions concluded with appreciation and closing speech and token handover to all participants before the group photo session. After the community left, the students had a debriefing session with the Academic Supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Narelle on the session that just concluded and provided advice on the next FGD session.

Day 1: Session 2 (Evening) - Indian Community in Chaah (Hindu Religion Expert)

2nd session for Group 2 with the Indian community in *Kuil Thirumugan*, Chaah with a total of 8 participants (8 Male) participated for the session. Before starting the session, the participants heartfully prepared a delicious vegetarian feast for us, facilitators and students. Then, the session started with opening remarks by the SEACO facilitator and short introductory by all the students.

Similar to the previous session, the FGD session started with a brief introduction of the topics and the participants were given 15 - 20 minutes to discuss and list out all the important events/ celebration/ checkpoint in an individual life as a Hindu practitioner. Once completed, the participants explained all the listed items on the mind map and the students asked further questions on the topics. Then, they were given stickers, and the students asked the



participants to put the sticker on the most significant event for a Hindu practitioner individual before further questions were asked.

At the same time of the FGD activity in session, an in-depth interview was also conducted with the respondents by 2 of the students (1 as facilitator and 1 as note taker/ audio recorder). The students take turns to be interviewed with a set of questions different as compared to the questions to the FGD sessions.

Before the conclusion of the session with appreciation and closing speech and token handover to all participants, the students were brought to site visits around the Kuil Thirumugan which showed different areas of the Kuil for different events with different statues of different Gods in Hindu religion. During the site visits, further questions were asked and participants shared their experience and provided further explanation.

Day 2: Session 3 (Morning) - Chinese Community in Chaah (Buddhist Religion Expert)

3rd session for Group 2 with the Chinese community in *Tokong Penganut Dewa Far Nam*, Chaah with 1 participant (1 Male) participated for the session as the Buddhist expert which started with opening remarks by the SEACO facilitator and short introductory by all the students.

Slightly different as compared to the previous session, only an in-depth interview session was conducted where it was facilitated by 1 of the students who were fluent in Mandarin language. The interview continued for around 1 hour with 1 Buddha religion expert (1 Male), before the students were able to go around the Tokong Penganut Dewa Far Nam while asking questions on Buddha religion. Then, appreciation speech and token was handover to the participants

Lastly, the students were brought to another temple in Kg Kangkar 1, Chaah for a site visit with 2 members of the CEC of SEACO and observe the different statues of Gods in Buddha religion.

Day 2: Session 4 (Evening) - Chinese Community in Chaah (Buddha Religion Practitioner)

4th session for Group 2 with the Chinese community in *Bilik Jawatankuasa Perkuburan Orang Cina Chaah*, Chaah with a total of 8 participants (8 Female) participated for the session which started with opening remarks by the SEACO facilitator and short introductory by all the students.

Similar to the previous session, the FGD session started with a brief introduction of the topics and the participants were given 15 - 20 minutes to discuss and list out all the important events/ celebration/ checkpoint in an individual life as a Buddha practitioner. The session was facilitated by 1 of the students who were fluents in Mandarin and assisted to translate to other students. Once completed, the participants explained all the listed items on the mind map and the students asked further questions on the topics.

Then, they were given stickers, and the students asked the participants to put the sticker on the most significant event for a Buddha practitioner individual before further questions were asked. At the end of the session, SEACO facilitators and students thanked the participants, gave the token and concluded with a group photo session.

Day 3: Session 5 (Morning) - Malay Community in Jabi (Islam Religion Practitioner)



On the 3rd day, 5th session for Group 2 with the Malay community in *Balai Raya Kampung Jabi 1*, Jabi with a total of 10 participants (3 Male & 7 Female) participated for the session which started with opening remarks by the SEACO facilitator and short introductory by all the students.

The FGD session started with a brief introduction of the topics and the participants were given 15 - 20 minutes to discuss and list out all the important events/ celebration/ checkpoint in an individual life as a Islam practitioner. The interesting thing happens where the discussion was separated into two groups in which both of the groups produce different mindmaps with different things. One of them contains important events/ celebration in terms of the whole of Islam religion while the other groups produce a mindmap of the life journey of a Muslim individual starting from the birth until the death.

Once completed, the participants presented both of the different mind maps and the students asked further questions on the topics. Then, they were given stickers, and the students asked the participants to put the sticker on the most significant event for a Islam practitioner individual before further questions were asked. The students have a mini tour of the Kg Jabi Mosque before ending the session with an appreciation speech, giving the token and concluding with a group photo session.

Day 3: Session 6 (Evening) - Malay Community in Gemereh (Islam Religion Practitioner)

On the evening of the 3rd day, the 6th session was held with the Malay Community in *Balai Raya Gemereh*, Gemereh with a total of 7 participants (4 Male & 3 Female). The session started as usual with welcoming and introductory speech by the facilitator followed by the students.

Similar to all previous sessions, the FGD session started with a brief introduction of the topics and the participants were given 15 - 20 minutes to discuss and list out all the important events/ celebration/ checkpoint in an individual life as an Islam practitioner. Once completed, the participants explained all the listed items on the mind map and the students asked further questions on the topics. The sticker activity was not done for this session, instead an extensive set of questions were asked to the participants.

It is observed that for this session, 1 participant dominated the discussion which caused the other participants to limit their contribution towards the session. The students also focus all their questions towards the participants only as he is fluent in English thus making the questions can be asked and answered smoothly.

Then, the students were able to visit the Gemereh mosque and conclude the session as usual speech and token giving session.

Day 4: Session 7 (Morning) - Government Official in Sg Segamat (Islam Religion Expert)

On the last day of the fieldwork, the 7th session was held in Segamat District Islamic Religious Office with 4 government officials (1 Male & 3 Female). The session started as usual with welcoming and introductory speech by the facilitator followed by the students.

Four of the participants then discuss together to produce a mind map on the journey of a Muslim from the birth until the end including life after death. The *Ustaz* then explain in detail all of the contents in the mind map and answer all the questions from the students together. Next, they were given a sticker and identified the most important event in the life of a Muslim



before further explanation was given. At the same time, an in-depth interview was also conducted for 1 Male (*Ustaz*) and 1 Female (Intern) in turns for individual questionnaires to understand deeper into the life of a Muslim in Segamat.

After the session was over, SEACO facilitators and students thanked the participants, exchanged a token between SEACO and Segamat District Islamic Religious Office, also a group photo session. At the end, the Segamat District Islamic Religious Office also prepared a feast for facilitators and students to eat together with the participants.

3. Observation & Community Feedback

All of the participants in the FGD sessions were appreciated through light refreshments provided during the FGD sessions and interviews and also given RM40 or a hamper as a token of appreciation of the time that they spend answering questions and sharing their life experiences. SEACO and Monash University Malaysia sincerely appreciate participants' assistance in this project, as it is valuable towards improving not only individual health but also the overall health of the community and the future generation.

The community also appreciates the FMA 2026 programme as they are able to communicate and interact with students from Monash University Malaysia and Monash University Australia. On top of that, they are really open and excited to share their knowledge and experiences towards the topics that were asked to them which provide them with valuable experiences.

The FMA 2026 programme was also valuable experience for SEACO in supporting students to translate academic knowledge into practical field-based research. Through direct engagement with communities in Segamat, students gained a better understanding of qualitative research, community dynamics, cultural sensitivity, and the importance of building trust with participants. The programme also provided SEACO staff with an opportunity to share our field experience and strengthen our mentoring, coordination, and community engagement skills.

Overall, FMA 2026 demonstrated the value of experiential learning and collaboration between students, academics, SEACO staff, and local communities. The programme also highlighted opportunities to further strengthen pre-fieldwork preparation, field guidance, and post-fieldwork reflection in future programmes. Moving forward, SEACO can continue to serve as an important platform for students to develop practical research skills while fostering meaningful and respectful engagement with communities.

4. Recommendations

For future FMA programmes, the overall programme flow could be structured with clearer preparation before the students begin their fieldwork. A pre-fieldwork briefing should cover the research objectives, field methods, ethical considerations, community engagement approaches, field safety, and expected roles and responsibilities. The students should be given the topics early and provide ample time to discuss between themselves so they are able to finalize the topics before they arrive in Malaysia. The earlier the topics have been finalised, the better the fieldwork arrangements can be arranged.

Finally, the programme should include a dedicated post-fieldwork reflection and sharing session before the programme concludes. Students could present their key findings, challenges, and learning experiences, while SEACO staff and community representatives



could provide feedback. This would create a stronger connection between fieldwork, academic learning, and community engagement, while also providing useful feedback to improve the planning and implementation of future FMA programmes.

5. Pictures



Picture 1: Day 1 - Session 1 (with Indian Community in Bekok) session completed



Picture 2: Day 1 - Session 2 (with Indian Community in Chaah) vegetarian feast prepared by the participants



Picture 3 & 4: Day 2 - Session 3 (with Chinese Community in Chaah) in-depth interview with Buddhist expert & Site visit to Buddhist Temple



Picture 5: Day 2 - Session 4 (with Chinese Community in Chaah) FGD session in progress



Picture 6: Day 3 - Session 5 (with Malay Community in Jabi) mind map discussion in progress



Picture 7: Day 3 - Session 6 (with Malay Community in Gemereh) mind map discussion in progress



Picture 8: Day 4 - Session 7 (with Segamat District Islamic Religious Office) presentation on the mind map