

## Religion and Cultural Change in Paddy Farming among Native in Sarawak, Malaysia

<sup>1</sup>Daniel Ugih Uchoh, <sup>2</sup>Salfarina Abdul Gapor and <sup>3</sup>N. Lyndon

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia,

Jalan Sungai Dua, 11800 Georgetown, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Albukhary International University,

Jalan Tun Abdul Razak, 05200 Alor Setar, Kedah, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>School of Social Development and Environmental Studies,

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** The main focus of this research is to see changes in religious and cultural activities of Iban ethnic in agriculture sector. Accordingly, this study will use the interpretive approach using phenomenology approach based on idealist ontology and constructionist epistemology. This study was conducted in Kuala Serupai and Sungai Semanok, Kuala Tatau, Sarawak. Data was gathered using in depth interview, focus group discussion and also personally observe the farming activities. A total of 17 informants were involved in this research using the non-probability sampling technique that includes quota sampling, purposive sampling and theoretical sampling. The size of this study's sample was achieved through continuous support toward measurement or criteria of theoretical sampling. The findings from the study shows that changes in religion and believes occurred in both villages. The religion changes in Kuala Serupai and Sungai Semanok is due to implicit factors amongst the farming community, many converted to suit the desire of their children and also in hope to change their fortune. At the same time, the reason being for farmers to convert from their animism believes to Christianity was due to the fact that they were influenced by their children whom had already been converted to Christianity.

**Key words:** Christianity, native, paddy farming, culture, Sarawak

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### INTRODUCTION

Paddy farming is the main economical among Iban community at the rural areas of Sarawak. There are 2 types of paddy planted, such as dry and the hill paddy. Dry paddy are planted by farmers that who were living at the lowlands by the coast of Sarawak such as Kuala Tatau, Kuala Balingian, Kuala Mukah, Kuala Baram and the coastal areas of Kuching. However, hill paddy are planted at the highlands near to the foothills, such as Ulu Anap in Tatau, Ulu Balingian, Ulu Kanowit, Santubong and the areas in the highlands of Lundu. Paddy farming involves shifting system by moving from one area to another area amongst the farmers within the farmer's land. This has been practiced by >76.5% of ethnic groups in the regions of Sarawak. Typically, this shifting method involved the changing of farming lots more frequently, as compared to the crop rotating method and the burning down of undergrowth and trees. These farming activities are

usually done without the use of farming animals for instance when ploughing the soils and also fertilizing the soil. However, it is completely dependent on man power to complete these farming task, such as ploughing, transporting the harvest and much more.

Some of the frequently used tools are the seedling tool and hoe. In terms of time spending, this method of farming would be done in a short period of time from one land to another while those lands are left to be rang lands (Pelzer, 1945). There are 2 types of paddy planting that the Iban farmers were practice, such as based on their cultural system and their animistic belief (Lyndon *et al.*, 2011; Ngidang and Abdul, 1999). They believe that most outcomes in life, especially in paddy farming has a strong tie with their surroundings. For example, farmers must retrieve from working at the paddy fields when they hear chirping from the ketupung, beragai, kucea and papau birds, as they believe that hearing the chirping from those birds would bring misfortune to the farmers (Chambers,

1994; Siwar, 1985). Osman and Yusoff (1983) believed that many myths and legends among the aborigine community of Sarawak had to do with the origins of the paddy and also the adoration ceremony for the paddy. Pulang Gana is one of the most frequently phrased spirit in these myths. So, as the relationship with the positioning of the 7 star in the sky along with important dates or day which is suitable for paddy planting. According to Osman and Yusoff (1983), believes and rituals on paddy farming amongst the Iban community are strongly related to spirits and referring to the stars, as a tool to decide on the most suitable time for paddy planting.

According to Muhammad Harun, Iban community performs ritual dances in adoration of the paddy spirits. Tolak bala dance, also known as the sigar dance is performed during the end of the harvesting seasons, as a sign of gratitude to the Petara (who has no parents and creates everything in this world and other worlds) for a great harvest. Offerings such as fruits, rice cooked in woven leaves and eggs are prepared for the penunggu. These offerings are placed into a bamboo basket known as a taya. Before the dance begins, candles, coconut oil and turmeric rice are prepared for the Petara. After the dance ends, the offerings will be presented to the Petara. The Iban community forbids wasting extra food made up of rice in fear of losing spirit. Male farmers are also prohibited to eat when walking to the paddy fields, as it may cause derogation in harvest.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research utilized the phenomenology paradigm that entails the construction of theories that are grounded in everyday activities in the language and meaning of social actors. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, bracketing taken-for-granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. It is based on idealist ontology and the epistemology of constructionism. For this study, 2 villages in Kuala Tatau namely Sungai Semanok and Kuala Serupai were chosen. Both villages were chosen to enable the comparison between practice and beliefs in farming due to multiple factors, for instance the distance of both villages from Bintulu City, infrastructures and facilities availability and the size of the population. In order to collect data for this study, the researchers use a qualitative research method and conduct in-depth interview with the farmer held in focus group discussion and also personally observe the farming activities. This study involves 17 farmers who were interviewed in both villages, 8 from Kuala Serupai and nine from Sungai Semanok. Researcher had conducted interview with the

farmers ranging from different backgrounds, age ranges, gender and also from different experiences involving the paddy farming and conducting certain ceremonial rituals, such as the miring (farmers perform ceremonial rituals to seek for help and blessings from the Petara whenever something unfortunate happens, namely birds flying into homes and fields of the farmers) and manggul (a ritual performed by farmers who still strongly believe and practice animism before clearing the forest). The analysis of qualitative data was carried out based on the narratives obtained from in-depth interviews. Additional field notes from non-participant observation were also obtained. A sequence of activities was carried out during the analysis as follows:

- Data was transcribed from recorded interview of each respondent, written in Iban language, the native language of the researched participants
- The taped interviews were reviewed and examined at least twice before they were transcribed
- Each transcription was reviewed several times and reorganized to provide brief explanation on the categories of differences of men and women in educational attainment
- Process of data cleaning entails making the necessary corrections and excluding any redundancies
- The transcription was then translated to English in order to clarify and reduce the influence of researcher's biases
- Involves managing the data by constructing categories into a matrix table, tabulating the findings into a more organized fashion
- Using the themes produced from constant comparative analysis
- Particular quotes were tabulated according to the line numbers that appear in the script

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Farmer's profile:** Total 5 male and 3 female farmers were interviewed in Kuala Serupai, whereas 3 male and 6 female farmers were interviewed in Sungai Semanok. In terms of age, the average age of the farmers interviewed in both villages was 58 years old as illustrated in Table 1. Besides that the data collected shows the marital status of the farmers, 1 was still a bachelor, 2 was widowed whereas the rest were married. The average income of the farmers was MYR 371 only.

**Religion change:** Based on the study, researcher found that there is a substantial change of religion amongst the

Table 1: Profile of the farmers in Kuala Serupai and Sungai Semanok

Farmers	Gender	Age	Members of household	Status	Occupation	Income (MYR)
A (KS)	Male	70	2	Married	Farmer	300
B (KS)	Male	71	2	Married	Farmer	200
C (KS)	Male	68	2	Married	Farmer	100
D (KS)	Female	34	2	Married	Farmer	800
E (KS)	Male	55	2	Married	Farmer	200
F (KS)	Male	43	2	Single	Farmer	600
G (KS)	Female	79	2	Widowed	Farmer	300
H (KS)	Female	62	2	Married	Farmer	200
I (SS)	Male	53	6	Married	Farmer	300
J (SS)	Male	70	4	Married	Farmer	300
K (SS)	Male	58	10	Married	Farmer	500
L (SS)	Female	45	5	Married	Farmer	600
M (SS)	Female	85	2	Married	Farmer	200
N (SS)	Female	74	5	Widowed	Farmer	200
O (SS)	Female	34	4	Married	Farmer	500
P (SS)	Female	38	7	Married	Farmer	300
Q (SS)	Female	43	5	Married	Farmer	800

KS = Kuala Serupai; SS = Sungai Semanok

Iban farmers in Kuala Serupai and Sungai Semanok. In Kuala Serupai, the reason being for farmers to convert from their animism believes to Christianity was due to the fact that they were influenced by their children whom had already been converted to Christianity. Besides that this change in religion and believe amongst the farmers in Kuala Serupai was also caused by the farmers attempt to change their fortune or luck in paddy farming based on Christian teachings. In other words, the farmers wanted to see the improvement in the paddy harvest based on Christian teaching. Despite the change in religion of the Kuala Serupai farmers which had converted to Christianity, many still believed that the chirping of certain birds would lead to misfortune in their lives for instance experiencing bad paddy harvest, involving in a fatal accident or even facing work unproductively. In Sungai Semanok, researcher found one farmer whom had converted to Christianity from the previous animism believes.

According to him, he had changed his religion due to poor harvest, apart from that his house was constantly flocked by animals that were believed to bring good fortune, such as birds, anteater and snakes. Being aware of these changes, he immediately returned to the animism believes and taboos then he begin to practice the rituals related to paddy farming. In previous years, he had experienced good harvest when he had converted to Christianity compared to other years when he had not convert.

#### Change in culture

**Taboos:** The change of religion amongst the farmers in Kuala Serupai, had caused many of the previously prohibited practices to be abandoned. According to farmer C (68) who is now a Christian, responded that he

now does not believe the taboos related to farming that previously he had believed in. Before that he would retrieve from the paddy fields when he hears the chirping of the birds which was believed to bring misfortune, such as the ketupung, beragai and kucea. Now, these taboos had be abandoned because they now believe that everything that happens is up to God's will.

**The berduruk practice:** Around the 1900's, the berduruk practice, involving working in large groups in the paddy fields without wages in an alternating manner was done in both villages. According to farmer G (79) and H (62) in Kuala Serupai, this practice was rarely done due to the fact that the amount of paddy planted was small. In actual fact, this practice is not only done in paddy farming but also done when performing the miring ritual in the paddy fields and in the long houses. In Sungai Semanok, researcher was able to participate in the miring ritual in the fields with a group of farmers, researcher was able to observe that the farmers helped each prior to performing the ritual.

**The berdandang practice:** According to the findings, the berdandang practice whereby farmers plants the paddy next to the fields of another farmer begin to decrease. In Sungai Semanok, this practice is still carried out because there are still many paddy farmers in village, however in Kuala Serupai this practice is rarely done. Many farmers had stop paddy farming due to health problems, opportunities in the city and also aging. The decrease in this practice is also due to the fact that many farmers were forced to encounter firsthand risks, such as pest problems like rats, sparrows, squirrels, grasshopper.

**The manggul:** The task of clearing the forest has to be done after the manggul, whereby farmers asks for

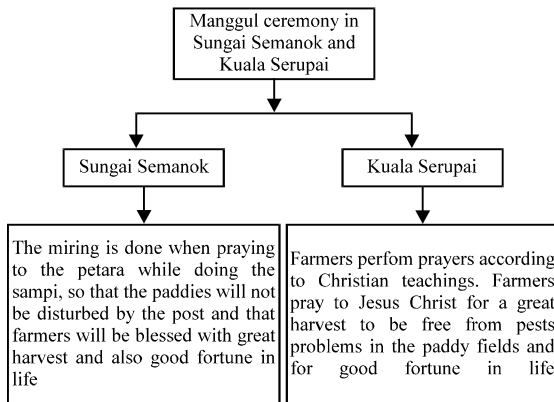


Fig. 1: Manggul in Sungai Semanok and Kuala Serupai

permission from the penunggu before clearing the forest. The manggul done by farmers in Kuala Serupai differs from farmers in Sungai Semanok whereby farmers still practices animism related to paddy farming while performing the miring. Miring is a ritual done by farmers to seek for permission from Petara or better known as goddess of the field before cutting down bushes and burning the fields. Besides that the miring is done to seek blessing from the Petara, so that the farms would be blessed with great harvest and they would not face any problems with pests in the fields. There are also situations whereby the miring is done to seek pardon from the Petara when burung (according to the Iban Animism believe, every animal are able to bring misfortune to some descendants of the farmers. Namely cats, iguanas, wild boars, anteaters and deer) flew into the farmer's house. For Christian farmers in Kuala Serupai, the manggul is done by praying to Jesus Christ to seek for his blessing in the paddy fields to be free from pest and to be blessed with great harvest. Prayers are usually performed by male farmers who are literate, however there are also some less literate women in Kuala Serupai who leads the prayers. This is because of the fact that they have sufficient experience and skills to conduct prayers, their husbands usually follows the leads of their wives. Figure 1 shows the difference in manggul done through the miring ritual and the prayers performed by farmers in Sungai Semanok and Kuala Serupai.

**Miring:** For Christian farmers in Kuala Serupai, the miring ritual in farming is no longer practiced. Usually the miring is done to seek for blessings and help from the Petara or the goddess worshiped in animism to ensure better harvest and good fortune in life. Miring is also done to seek for pardon from the Petara whenever birds which bring misfortune, such as the beragai, kucea, papau and ketupungenter the farmer's home and also the fields when the farmers are working at the fields. Besides this miring

is also done during manggul, nungkuabus (nungkuabus is performed after the seedling of the paddy plants. Items involved are eggs and charcoal, these 2 items are mixed then thrown on the wall with water and rendai. Then, ashes are smeared on hands and also on the wall, as high as the houses are in hopes to receive great harvests, as high as the wall which the ashes were smeared on), ngambitangkai (farmers will pluck a few stems of paddy on the 1st day, subsequently on the on the 2nd and 3rd day before harvesting begins. Those stems of paddies are tied together using red threads and these tied up bundles of paddies will be harvested when the season of harvesting ends) stalks of paddy before the harvest begins and ngambijerami (farmers will harvest or take a few bundles of paddies tied up during the ngambitangkai ceremony when the harvesting seasons begins) dry paddy stalks for farmers who still practices animism for instance farmers in Sungai Semanok.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from the study shows that changes in religion and believes occurred in both villages. The religion changes in Kuala Serupai is due to implicit factors amongst the farming community, many converted to suit the desire of their children and also in hope to change their fortune. However, there are different factors behind the change in religion from animism to Christianity, one particular farmer in Sungai Semanok had converted to Christianity on his own desire to do so. The change of practice in farming, also occurred due to the reduction of farmers who still plant paddy in the field, the size of the paddy fields and also the increase in farmers who convert to Christianity. Researcher found that the distance between both villages from the city of Bintulu and the facility provided contributed no effect on the change of religion and culture of the paddy farmers in Kuala Tatau. The authority should see that the berdandang practice done by the farmers, as a environmentally friendly locals quality control of the paddy and a way to overcome pest problems and essentially lesson the use of pesticides, machineries, manual labour and chemical fertilizers. This method, also help them to reduce the environmental pollution by reducing the use of machineries, pesticides and also chemical fertilizers.

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