

The Murut Tahol Culture in Sabah: The Historical Journey and Challenges

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Abstract

The Murut Tahol community is one of the few well conserved indigenous groups in Sabah. This community is known for being a community that has its own distinctive identity. Although they were ruled by various administrations like the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) since 1881 till 1941, the Japanese Ruling (1946-1962), the era of post-independence since 1963; they are still holding adamantly to their traditional culture. The arrival of religious influences like Christianity started since the 1950s also did not distance themselves with their community's culture. Therefore, this has proven the ability of the Murut Tahol community to ensure their traditional cultures are preserved. Research that has been done on the Murut Tahol community in Kampung Alutok, Ulu Tomani, shows that the community is making adaptations to its culture so that it can be on par with the religion they have adopted and that it is well-suited with the passing of time. Therefore, their culture has always been relevant to the time and conditions of their community. The interesting thing about this community is their ability to separate cultural landscape that cannot be changed with the cultural practices that can be flexible; subsequently making their own choices on the cultural aspect that needs to be preserved or otherwise.

Keyword: Sabah, Murut Tahol, cultural continuity, reflection

1. Introduction

Sabah or previously known as North Borneo is a state endowed with cultural heritage in abundance. The cultural composition here is complex as it is made up of the cultures of various ethnic groups such as the Kadazan-dusun, Murut, Bajau, Iranun, Suluk Bisaya Kedayan, Tidong, Sungai, Brunei Malay and other indigenous communities. All of these communities are parts of the colourful multicultural society that add up to the national heritage of Malaysia. One of the most pertinent facts of the Murut Tahol community that needs to be shared here is their experience in ensuring their cultural conservation although there are only 0.03% of them as compared to the total population of Sabah (Sabah Monthly Estimation Bulletin, 2010).

This ability should not be underestimated because it is not easy for any community to ensure its culture remains relevant. There are too many challenges to be faced, like the changes in surrounding environment, ruling government and the consequent road to modernization, what more if all these changes are happening within a small-sized lesser-known community. Therefore, rightly so, it is good to highlight the experience of the Murut Tahol community in facing the various challenges in protecting their culture so that we can all benefit from it.

1.1 The Murut Tahol Community

The Murut Tahol community is originally from a settlement nearby Tahol River which is situated in Pensiangan and eventually migrated to other regions of Sabah. Often, they introduced themselves as *Ulu Tahol* which literally means the Tahol People. Based on the early records made around the 1800s, at that time the Murut Tahol community resided in the Padas River Valley. (Harris, 1990; Harrison, 1967).

The Murut Tahol community has been residing in the inner highlands of Southern Sabah comprising the Tomani Region, Rundum, Tenom and extending all the way to Sapulut and Pensiangan. The Murut Keningau community

is also known as Murut Nabai has been residing in the flatlands of the Keningau Region and the Murut Timugon community has been residing in the flatlands of the Tenom Region. The Murut Bookan community has been residing in the Dalit River Valley along the Sook border. The Murut Kolod community has been residing in the Bole Region, Sipitang and the Northern part of Kalimantan. The Murut Tenggara (Kinabatangan) community has been residing at the Ulu Kinabatangan River area extending to the Western part across the Ulu Kuamut River (Rutter, 1922).

Tregonning (1965) disclosed that the Murut community leads a very simple life. They live in a longhouse and practice traditional culture and customs for generations which they inherited from their ancestors. Their villages are remotely located in the outback which is well-suited to their lifestyle that comprises farming and hunting in order to survive. In this study, content analysis is utilized to interpret the facts from various perspectives.

1.2 The Murut Tahol Culture

Before discussing the Murut Tahol culture in detail, it would be good to first look at the definition of culture. Culture is understood as a complex system that includes knowledge, belief system, moral values, laws, customs and any skills and habits that mankind possess in order to be a member of the society. In other words, it is comprises all the behaviours that are studied, and from the practical aspect its main characteristics in cultural research that is often stated as a focus on customs and procedure (Mair, 1991). Therefore, the Murut Tahol culture, in the context of discussion here is 'the customs and the way the community does something in their lives.' Among these cultural practices are the customs related to marriage such as '*antamong*' (engagement), '*ahuot*' (marriage), '*tinauh*' (last gift), the customs related to death and '*amparawak ravivit*' (the sacred ritual of the rice seeds).

According to Antikoh Lituan (63), the traditional Murut Tahol culture is based on the belief in spirits and that spirits control the lives of mankind. They also believe in 'Aki Kaulung' as being one of the causes of all incidents. The cycle of life and all that they go through from birth till death, has connections to the belief system that they hold on to. In totality, the element of animism exists in their cultural practice such as in all the customs related to marriage, giving birth, death, hunting and farming. All the taboos prevalent in their culture also lead to the elements of respect and worship of the spirits.

The Longhouse that the community lives in is not only a shelter from rain and heat, it is very important to them from the aspects of economy and defence (Wooley, 1962). Besides, the longhouse plays an important role in supporting the cultural practices of the community including the practice of '*antaboh*' (head-hunting). The longhouse provides a safe surrounding for members of the community. It also makes it easier for them to defend themselves in the event of being attacked by enemy. It is also important to mention here that the longhouse also plays another significant role as a venue for the community to pass their knowledge relating to customs, taboos and other rules that are codified in their culture and customary terminology to the younger generation.

2. Cultural Challenges faced during the BNBC Rule

The culture of the Murut Tahol community had undergone challenges with the arrival of the foreign colonial masters beginning with the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) (1881-1941), followed by Japan (1942-1945), Britain (1946-1962) and the post-independence era of 1963. BNBCC was the longest colonial master that ruled North Borneo for about 60 years. The work of pioneer researchers such as Rutter (1929), Tregonning (1965), Whelan (1970) and Black (1983) reveal that the BNBCC ruling has left a great deal of impact on the cultural practices of this community. It had a direct influence on the administrative methods and rules implemented by them. Some of the laws that were enforced are not compatible with their culture which they have been practicing for generations so much so it created ill-feelings among them.

Among the cultural practice that the BNBCC has prohibited is the '*antaboh*' practice or headhunting (Whelan, 1970: 185) whereas for the Murut Tahol community this practice is very closely related to the aspect of spirituality. According to Antikoh Lituan, they practiced it with the purpose of increasing the spirituality within themselves and the society in the prevention of '*batul*' or the big caterpillars to meet with 'Aki Kaulung' in 'Limbowon'. Preventing the '*antaboh*' practice definitely disturbs their aspect of spirituality and jeopardises the balance between social and emotional aspects of the community. Conley (1974) noted in his research on the Kenyah community in which he stated:

"In the same way with the headhunting institution of the Kenyah, its rapid cessation would produce serious social emotional disequilibrium". (1974)

Based on the above quote, it is understandable why prohibition of the '*antaboh*' (head hunting) practice by the BNBCC has given rise to dissatisfaction among members of the Murut Tahol community.

Other regulations that were deemed to affect the lives of the Murut Tahol community is the tax system that was first imposed in 1913 on basic materials needed to make 'tapai' (rice wine). For example, for three kilograms of rice needed to make 'tapai' the tax imposed was \$ 0.02 and for three kilograms of cassava the tax was \$ 0.01 and for each coconut trees used to make the 'bahar' (a type of 'tuak' or toddy) the tax was \$ 0.25 (Fernandez, 2000). These taxes were undoubtedly a burden to them because drinking 'tapai' is a wide practice among the Murut community members of all ages and genders (Tregonning, 1965).

They usually drink 'tapai' when they celebrate highly significant days based on their customs related to farming such as chopping, planting and harvesting seasons. Similarly, they do that in welcoming the highly significant days in a person's life such as birth, marriage and death. However, this culture was considered to be detrimental to the community by the BNBBCC as it was causing serious health problems and often resulted in death. It was also the main cause that contributed to the decline in productivity of its economic activities and it had to be controlled.

Meanwhile, the Murut Tahol community has contrasting views on this regulation. On one hand, this regulation by the BNBBCC is seen as a violation against their culture. According to the information provided by Antikoh Lituan, 'tapai' is a very special drink. It has been a symbol of wealth and prosperity of the people for generations. Additionally, from the spiritual context, the consumption of 'tapai' is said to increase the 'karuroa' (spirit) and courage in oneself. It also plays an important role in strengthening social relationships among the community through the practice of sharing and exchanging food especially between the son-in-law and father-in-law. This dynamics was not understood by the BNBBCC resulting in their intervention by prohibiting this practice. According to Antikuh Lituan, "'tapai' is not just an ordinary drink. It makes our 'karuroa' (spirit) strong. In case there is any event, this is what we prepare for our guests. We must prepare lots of performance. If not, it will bring shame to the host."

2.1 A Reflection of the Cultural Challenges faced during the BNBBCC Administration

The reign of the BNBBCC in Sabah has indeed opened a new episode in the lives of the Murut Tahol community. They felt that the BNBBCC was imposing new values and norms hence, depriving them the lifestyle that they have practiced for generations. The differences that existed between the Murut Tahol community and the BNBBCC had given rise to animosity between them leading to ferocious battles in Rundum in 1915 (Fernandez, 1998).

In other words, the Murut Tahol community could not accept the domination by BNBBCC. However, they had no choice but to submit to the BNBBCC temporarily that brought huge changes to the traditional way of life which their successors inherited. The Murut Tahol community had to adapt their customs and practices in accordance to the requirements of the BNBBCC rule. During the reign of BNBBCC, the Murut Tahol had to comply with the prohibition of the 'antaboh' (head hunting) practice. This had an adverse impact on the Murut Tahol community's culture as a whole. This is because 'antaboh' is a fundamental practice in animism which is a belief system that they hold on to firmly hence, becoming one of the pillars to their culture. When 'antaboh' is no longer practised then, the grandeur of the 'Aki Kaulung' philosophy cannot be manifested as before. A major part of the Murut Tahol culture, lost its significance since the welcoming ceremony of newly-hunted heads was abolished. In addition, the aspect of community consolidation that was long attributed to this practice was also affected. However, there were also many who disregarded this prohibition and though the number of defectors was not huge, it is testimony that they still held on to their traditional custom.

Besides, the 'tapai' drinking culture among members of the Murut Tahol community was also altered whereby they had to reduce the quantity of 'tapai' consumed during the 'ahuyu' (communal work). This is due to an increase in the cost of ingredients used in making 'tapai' because of the tax imposed by the BNBBCC that had burdened the community. As was the case with the practice of nomadic agriculture, whereby some of them were hard-pressed to cultivate a farm up to two years whereas previously they moved to a new farm each year because of the exorbitant tax implemented by the BNBBCC to open new land.

3. Cultural Challenges faced during the Japanese Occupation

After North Borneo was fully captured by the Japanese Army, Sabah was declared as part of Dai Nippon (The Greater Japan). Subsequently, under the Japanese occupation a better quality of life was enjoyed by the communities of North Borneo. In contrast to the BNBBCC Administration, North Borneo was ruled by military. The Japanese Administration was led by a military Commander, Marquis Toshinari Maeda. The Japanese Military Commander and his Officers had extensive powers in public administration including economic matters.

North Borneo was governed by the two Japanese administrative centres known as the 'Shekei Shui' and 'Tokai Shui.' 'Shekei Shui' covered West Coast Residency, Kudat and the interior areas, while 'Tokai Shui' covered Sandakan and Tawau Residency. In order to strengthen its power in North Borneo, Japan had focused on strengthening as well as

monitoring the middle part which covered Ranau and Pensiangan. Besides, the Japanese had also made Keningau, Tenom and Beaufort its important administrative centres (Tregonning, 1965; Whelan, 1970).

A more prosperous life, as promised the Japanese Government was not forthcoming. Since January 19, 1942, the Japanese Army captured and imprisoned all Europeans in North Borneo except several doctors and a magistrate, while other communities living in fear (Whelan, 1970). The local community's hatred for the Japanese was apparent since the start of their occupation. This is because the Japanese ruled by using extreme violence. According to Antikoh Lituan, the Murut Tahol community at that time faced a lot of challenges and their life was full of hardship. He said "In the Japanese time, we had to run a long way in the forest. The Japanese always tortured villagers. Some of the villagers were made to drink soap water, slapped, forced to lie down outside under the sun...".

The Japanese Army had seized all their hunting weapons and possessions including food and clothing. Some adult males were forced into labour by the Japanese without any payment in a few places such as Keningau and Tenom to build an airplane runway. Those who oppose would be punished mercilessly. Some of them were badly beaten up with guns until they became unconscious, while members of their families were treated badly. According to him, their deep hatred for the Japanese at the time had prompted his father to join the hunting expedition for the Japanese soldiers in Sipitang. His father's team was said to have killed nine Japanese soldiers. Antikuh Lituan said, "we really hated the Japanese, they had no compassion for the villagers. My own father and the villagers were able to kill nine Japanese soldiers in Sipitang."

The brutality of the Japanese troops had prompted the Murut Tahol community people to choose to stay away in the inner areas. This was the only way to stay away from the atrocities of the Japanese Army. The same thing also happened to the Chinese community living in the cities and towns whereby some of them moved out to the rural areas and lived as farmers (Evans, 1991).

According to Antikoh Lituan, even if the Japanese did not impose any form of taxes other than the head tax, their culture was severely affected by food shortage. This resulted in them not be able to provide sufficient *tapai* when organising wedding ceremonies, engagement and so on. In addition, they had to save up seeing that their rice supply and other food were limited. In other words, the food shortage that they faced had a terrible impact on the '*tapai*' drinking custom compared to the tax imposed by the BNCC on the ingredients for making '*tapai*.' Antikuh Lituan said, "During the Japanese time, even eating was difficult. There was hardly any rice to eat. So, we could not make '*tapai*', even if we could, it was too little and that was not enough".

Most of the Murut Tahol community members still followed the '*antaboh*' custom surreptitiously although it was prohibited by the BNCC. During the Japanese occupation, the community continued this cultural practice. As a result of the atrocities committed by the Japanese Army, the soldiers were the main target in performing this custom. Hence, a lot of the stories were shared between them on how the Japanese soldiers were beheaded by the Murut people to seek revenge for the atrocities committed by them.

3.1 A Reflection of the Cultural Challenges faced During the Japanese Occupation

Basically, the Japanese Administration had failed to govern Sabah well. They not only failed to provide a better system of governance, they were in fact disrupting the public administration systems that existed during the BNCC Administration. They were unable to repair damaged infrastructure during the war. As a result, various problems related to socio-economy, public administration, and even education occurred. All these problems were mainly attributed to a few factors such as a weak economic position, incompetent public administrator and the lack of focus because of the ongoing war.

The Japanese occupation in Sabah has recorded its own dark history for the local community. The Japanese Army had enforced martial law and in their memory they could only recollect violence and cruelty. Hence the hardship and sufferings endured by them were the only two things that the informants kept repeating when they related their experience under the Japanese occupation.

The Murut Tahol community had intentionally distanced themselves from the Japanese rule but they had also suffered from the consequences of the incompetence of the Japanese rule. The shortage of rice had resulted in them not being able to make '*tapai*' as frequently as before. This had an adverse impact on the practice of drinking '*tapai*' for the community which is an important beverage consumed during their rituals.

4. Cultural Challenges faced during the British Rule

Following the defeat of Japan in World War II, North Borneo (Sabah) was placed under the British Military Rule (PTB) also known as the British Military Administration (BMA) from 28th September 1945 until North Borneo became a British Royal Crown Colony or British Crown Colony on 15th July 1946. The British Military

Administration (BMA) was meant to be temporarily headed by C.F. Macaskie, a former Chief Justice of North Borneo during the BNBCC rule (Whelan, 1970).

The main focus of BMA was to repair damages sustained during the war. Based on the reports issued by BMA, it was found that the damage caused during the war was so severe that it had drawn Sabah backward to the era prior to 1881:

"There were no public utility services (water, light, power, telephones). Schools and hospitals were non-existent. Disease and malnutrition were great. Crime was rampant, communications were practically non-existent, food was scarce and the whole process of government had come to a standstill "(Tregonning, 1965).

North Borneo was hit by severe damage so much so that it was impossible for the BNBCC to continue with its administration after the BMA came to an end. This was understood by the BNBCC President, Sir Neil Malcolm and members of its Board of Directors. On 26th June 1946, the BNBCC signed an agreement with the British Government to surrender its rights over North Borneo. The British Government paid £860,000 as initial payments for the BNBCC to settle its debts and its shareholders (Tregonning, 1965; Whelan, 1970).

Then, North Borneo was put under by the Government Administration of British North Borneo. This new administration concentrated more on matters relating to the Sabah redevelopment programmes such as improving infrastructure and enhancing the economic activities. At the same time, a number of planning for the future of Sabah towards self-governance had also been arranged (Whelan, 1970).

Efforts to revive Sabah took a long time and required high commitment in several aspects. It involved recovery in terms of politics, social and economy. In terms of administration and politics in general, local communities had been given the opportunity to participate as in the days of BNBCC before. Their involvement in the local economy improved with the opening of estates and private farms. In addition, damaged infrastructure such as railways was improved and could be fully used. It became the catalyst for the export activities of British North Borneo (Whelan, 1970; Tregonning, 1965).

In terms of education, the British Administration had been able to restructure the educational system that was disrupted due to the war. Efforts had shown impressive results where, more and more communities in Sabah had the opportunity to obtain primary and secondary education (Whelan, 1970). Although redevelopment was actively carried out, its impact on the Murut Tahol community was not apparent. This was because the community lived deep in the interiors and was hardly affected by the ensuing development.

4.1 A Reflection of the Cultural Challenges faced During the British Rule

For the Murut Tahol community, the economic development carried out through the cultivation of crops as well as the schooling facilities through a formal educational system provided by the Government were still not benefitting them because of the remote location of their settlements which were deep in the interiors. This means that programmes undertaken by the Government did not leave any impact on them. In terms of cultural practices, they only inherited the challenges brought on by the previous Government and as a result adopted a defensive attitude towards it.

In addition, the Murut communities were experiencing the problem of population decline. Census results in 1921 pointed out that the population of the Murut community was 30,355 people. Meanwhile in 1951 census recorded only 18724 people. This indicated that the Murut community was facing a serious problem of declining population (Crain, 1972). In 1953, the British sent experts to do further studies on this problem. Among those involved was Dr. I. Polunin, a lecturer in social medicine at the University of Malaya, Dr. Mary Saunders from Singapore and Dr. J. Landgraf, an anthropologist from the United States (Tregonning, 1965).

5. The Cultural Challenges in the Post-Independence Era

Sabah gained independence during the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. The formation of Malaysia together with Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore were on the basis of cooperation and common interest. This means Sabah started to self-govern. The change from a state ruled by foreign administrations to self-governance was of course extremely significant to the people of Sabah including the Murut Tahol community in Kampung Alutok, UluTomani. After independence, the socio-economic landscape of the community changed. This development had posed a challenge to their traditional culture.

In terms of economic activity, for example, rubber cultivation had overtaken the traditional economic activity of paddy cultivation. The rubber cultivation areas were increasing by the day. Based on the information obtained from the District Office of Kecil Kemabong, to date the rubber plantation in Kampong Alutok is estimated to be about 350 hectares. Meanwhile the rice crop area is only around 70 hectares. One of the reasons for such

development is that people here are more interested in the cultivation of crop which can give better returns. Hence, rice cultivation is given less attention. They grow paddy to meet their requirements only.

These developments have to some extent left an impact on the cultural practices relating to rice which was formerly the main crop in the Murut Tahol community. The rituals related to paddy cultivation such as '*amparawak ravivit*' (purification of rice seeds) become less important. This is because of the gradual decline in their dependency on rice.

In terms of education, two years after the formation of Malaysia, a primary school was built in Kuala Tomani, about 30 kms from Kampung Alutok. With the construction of this school, the residents in Tomani and the surrounding areas including the villagers of Kampung Alutok are able to get formal primary level education. The school is also equipped with dormitories for students, especially for those who are unable to commute to school every day (Annual report of the Department of Education. Tenom District, 1986: 66). Then in 2000, a primary school was built in Kampung Alutok. With the construction of this school, the kids in the village will no longer have to go to school elsewhere.

A formal education also plays an important role in helping students here to think scientifically based on facts and logic. An informant admitted that science subjects for example, have left a deep impression on him. This is because it opened his mind to think about the reasons why things happen. They are not only taught to believe every fact presented but can also be proven by carrying out simple experiments. For him, these things do not stop in the classroom and it leaves a deep impact on the way he thinks. He was first tempted to find reasons for all the things that happened including, matters related to beliefs and taboos of the ancestors.

The things experienced by the informant had a lot in common with a Kelabit community student in Sarawak. According to him, attending formal research classes has actually opened a new chapter in his life. He expressed so:

"Obtaining a formal education, for instance, has opened a new world to me. Before that, I had no thought of money, fame, or power. I had shaped my life, without being told, by observing customs, taboos and other cultural practices, and limits gradually assimilated elaborate rules that governed relations between members of the community, including relations between males and females"(Poline, 2002).

The above quote shows us that the system of formal education also provides a challenge to one's cultural traditions. It makes a person more open to see and evaluate the customs, culture and taboos inherited by them.

5.1 Reflection of the Cultural Challenges faced during the Post-Independence Era

The Murut Tahol community saw a continuation of the challenges concerning their cultural practices in Ulu Tomani up to the post-independence era. The approach adopted in facing the situation was the same as they did during the British Rule which was to protect whatever they had and stayed calm whilst controlling the damage done to their cultural practices. The effects of development could be seen when it started to take effect within the community as quoted below:

"Everywhere the ... increasing urbanization has tended to raise literacy; rising literacy has tended to increase (mass) media efforts; increasing media efforts, has gone with wider economic participation (per capita income) and political participation (voting)... " (Woods, 1975).

Development opens the door to other forms of changes in a wider context. The acceptance to a change in their culture has led them to a lot more changes. When all of these changes are adopted, then we would be able to see the impact of those changes on the socio-cultural system in the community (Woods, 1975).

The Murut Tahol community became more open to changes after going through a wide range of experiences especially in relation to their socio-economy as well as politics. The sense of loss within the community which resulted from the prohibition of '*antaboh*' was also slowly forgotten. Their calm and strong approach towards these challenges has finally led the way to solutions over the years. Eventually, their belief in the fundamentals of animism eroded and was replaced with faith in Christianity. Putting it simply, a reflection of the Murut Tahol culture in the post-independence period is one in which the community embraced Christianity. In a sense, Christianity can be regarded as the savior of the Murut Tahol culture.

At first, the introduction to Christianity as an alternative faith was considered to be a challenge to the culture and traditions of the Murut Tahol community. As such, when Christian missionaries from Indonesia came to their village in 1930, they protested vehemently. Hence, for safety reasons, the missionaries stayed away from the residential areas of the Murut Tahol community. In 1937, Christian missionaries from BEM came to their village for the same purpose. Yet again, their efforts were met with failure (Lees, 2006).

However, in 1950 something unexpected happened whereby 50 Murut Tahol people from Maligan came to the Grand Hall in Sipitang, met with Alan Belcher and asked him to teach them the Bible. A missionary was rushed to them immediately. Their willingness to embrace Christianity began when they saw positive changes happening to Christian communities living near the Lun Bawang area (Lees, 2006).

According to Antikuh Lituan, embracing Christianity has indirectly relieved the community from 'antaboh,' a traditional practice that could harm oneself, family and community as a whole. Antikuh quoted, "... after becoming a Christian, our life is more peaceful. No longer need to go for 'antaboh,' and even those who go for 'antaboh,' won't know his own fate, alive, dead, the family would be heartbroken". This expression proved to us about the success of Christianity in changing the worldview of the Murut Tahol community. It has indirectly become a panacea for social and emotional disorders that have been caused to them as a result of the prohibition of 'antaboh' during the rule of the BNBCC. Similarly, Conley has recorded the same as that which happened to the Kenyah:

"...headhunting institution of Kenyah, its rapid cessation would produce serious social and higher level of disequilibrium, and in turn must have had an important bearing on the receptivity of the people to Christianity – if for no accumulation than that the loss of such powerful institution must have left a great nullity of void in their lives". (1974)

The study conducted in Kampung Alutok showed that the ancient culture which the community inherited has gone through significant adaptation over time to the belief system which exists currently. For example during the marriage ceremony, the marriage vows are taken in the name of Jesus Christ. However, customs which are contrary to the Christian religion are still being practiced. Holding a man's decapitated head ceases to be the criteria for a young man to prove that he is ready for marriage. Instead, they look at other direct aspects of human life that have to do with love among mankind as well as the ability to provide for their families. The priority now based on the teachings of Christianity, is how passionate a young man is to be a good husband to his wife. According to Pastor Yusof, "... people here believe that, if they want to get their children married, most importantly they must be good. Good at looking after their family".

In addition, this study also found the customs related to death performed by the Murut Tahol community had been adapted to Christian practices. According to Antikoh Lituan, their ancestral belief system propagated that the 'kinaruroa' in the jar can facilitate their journey in order to meet Aki Kaulung. This has led to their practice of using jars to keep the body of their dead family members during the funeral. Nowadays, the bodies of dead family members are kept in a coffin which is made of wood. This is because they no longer depend on the help of the spirits of their ancestors but on the concept of forgiveness by God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They rely on the promise that they will be guided toward happiness and all their suffering in life will be removed after death (Revelation, 7).

In Kampung Alutok, the 'amparawak ravivit' ceremony which is performed to clean up the rice seedling has been replaced with the blessing of rice seedlings. This ceremony is performed to seek the blessings of Jesus Christ so that better quality rice seedlings would be produced for the next season. This ceremony is performed simultaneously with another ceremony whereby they would give away 1/10 of the rice yield for the season to the Church. On that day, the ceremony begins with an opening prayer, followed by praise and worship, sermons and readings, prayer point (speech of blessing), speech regarding the rice seedlings and ends with the closing prayer.

Prayer:

"Akai anginsuat ra along mu ramoh, ra salangoi ru orou tu, am sulu ra akai akalap berkat intor ra tuhan" Amin.

Meaning:

"We give thanks for God's help in work all day/every day until this day we can give one tenths of our best to the Lord".

Prayer:

"Tuhan akai sembahyang ra susunu kitu hulin ra saumi umo. Am berkat mu tuhan susunu kitu. Kitu sino kinawa onsoi."

Meaning:

"Our Lord we wanted to pray specifically for rice seeds so it can be planted and grow properly".

The rice seedlings blessing ceremony can at least provide moral and spiritual support to the Murut Tahol community and help them overcome the anxiety that they face. The prayer is usually read out clearly to express their hope that the rice planting season would be perfect and would produce good quality rice. They grow confident believing that the Lord Jesus Christ is always with them and will not disappoint them. In other words, this

ceremony is believed to help the community improve confidence in facing the coming seasons. According to Pastor Yusof, "for the community here, the rice seedlings blessing ceremony is important. At least, they will then be more confident to start the new rice planting season."

6. Conclusion

The innate ability of the Murut Tahol community to reflect on the challenges undergone can be seen as a significant move towards cultural sustainability. They were quite adaptive to the new code of living that was compatible with formal religious ethics and community culture as compared to their ancient cultural practices and lifestyle. Part of the ancient culture was given new meaning and practiced in accordance to the new religion.

Undoubtedly, the Murut Tahol culture that we see today is not the same as the one discovered by the BNCC then, though it can be seen as the continuation of a culture that was given a new meaning. As revealed by Sahlins (1985), each change has continuity.

The cultural transformation that the Murut Tahol community underwent actually demonstrates that this community has been able to appreciate the ancient history that they have inherited. Later, their heritage was mixed together with new traditions and customs and both helped them face the future and deal with changes.

The historical past undergone by this community has made them more willing to confront all forms of future challenges. In Kampung Alutok, one can see the seriousness and determination of the community to move away from their traditional way of life and to continue with the new code of living. There are some elements of their ancient culture that is retained, some were left out and some were even modified so that it is in line with the teachings of Christianity which they have adopted now. It turned out that the traditional way of life of the Murut Tahol community and the teachings of Christianity can walk side by side and support each other.

On the one hand, on the part of the Church we can see their commitment in meeting the spiritual demands of the community. Hence, the spiritual emptiness that existed after the Murut Tahol people rejected animism could be filled quickly. For example, the Church made it a point to organise the *rice seedlings blessing* ceremony in April in Kampung Alutok. This practice is actually something new and never practiced anywhere else. It is performed to replace the '*amparawak ravivit*' (purification of rice seeds) ceremony which was done by their ancestors then. In this way the age old community will not lose their ancient culture. In a way, this practice will ensure that this traditional custom is sustainable in a new context. This demonstrates that Christianity as a religion in Kampung Alutok is practiced in a cultural context. This implies that the culture has a close relationship with religion and can walk side by side.

Based on the ability of the Murut Tahol community in facing changes with regards to religion and culture, the possibility of the Murut Tahol community to overcome the challenges in future is high. The confidence within the community becomes stronger eventually as we can see from the experience of other indigenous communities such as the Lun Bawang and Kelabit both of which managed equally well through similar challenges. In the case of the Kelabit community, they have stated that their culture is now more intact after being moulded by the new faith in Christianity. This is because Christianity has been positioned very effectively in maintaining cultural unity of the community.

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