



## Change and Continuity in Traditional Timugon Rice Cultivation Beliefs and Practices



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### [ *Abstract* ]

Before the start of the North Borneo Company administration in North Borneo (now Sabah, Malaysia) in 1882, the Timugon Murut of today's interior Tenom District lived in longhouses, and practiced head-hunting during wars with other Murutic ethnic groups. Their economy revolved around swidden agriculture of hill rice, sago, and cassava. Wet rice cultivation and water buffaloes were introduced just before 1885. Wet rice was planted on the alluvial plains around the Pegalan and Padas Rivers, while dry rice was planted on hillside swiddens that had been cleared by slash-and-burn methods. Today, wet rice cultivation and cash-cropping on the plains are the main Timugon socioeconomic activities, while some families also plant dry rice on the hills as a back-up. The Timugon believe that the physical world is surrounded by the spiritual world, and everything was made by the creator Aki Kapuuno'. The focus of this field research paper is on the beliefs and ritual practices of the Timugon connected to their traditional rice agriculture. This study found that for generations, the

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Timugon believed that since animals were created by Aki Kapuuno' for the wellbeing of humans, various types of animals and birds convey omens to guide people. Thus, the older Timugon rice cultivation is strongly influenced by good and bad omens and taboos, and also involves symbolic practices and ritual offerings to guardian spirits of the rice. After the 1930s and especially since the 1960s, most Timugon became Roman Catholic Christians. Hence, this paper also examines changes in the traditional Timugon rice cultivation related beliefs and practices due to religious conversion and other factors.

**Keywords:** Timugon Murut, rice cultivation, omens, rituals, religious conversion

## I . Introduction

The Timugon Murut speak one of about twelve languages of the indigenous Murutic Family of Languages of Sabah, which is the east Malaysian state of northern Borneo (Spitzack [1984] 1997). Numbering a total of approximately 97,300 (*Sabah Populations Census Report* 2010), Murutic peoples are scattered across southern Sabah and parts of northern Kalimantan. They are sometimes generally distinguished as either "highland Murut" or "lowland Murut" according to whether they live in the hills, or on the plains (Rutter [1929] 1985: 34; LeBar 1972: 153). Of the lowland Murut, the Timugon have a population of around 10,000 (9,000 in 2004, Brewis 2004: 936). They are located mainly in a small area of roughly 30 km from north to south on the west bank of the Pegalan River and the east bank of the Padas River at the confluence of the rivers near Tenom Town in the northern part of Tenom District. The ethnonym "Timugon" is derived from their term *timug* or "water" that connotes their traditional location in villages along the rivers as opposed to the Paluan Murut up on the hills to the east (Brewis [1990] 1991: 15).

Several studies on Timugon culture have been produced over the years, including the report *The Timoguns*: [sic.] *A Murut Tribe*

*of the Interior* (1936, republished as *The Timogun* [sic.] *Muruts of Sabah*, 2004) by G.C. Woolley, who served for many years as the Resident of Interior under the North Borneo Company administration, and the Master's thesis on Timugon beliefs by Raymond Emus Gintod (1982). Linguistic research was conducted by J.D. Prentice (1971), and more recently by others including researchers with the Malaysian branch of Summer Institute of Linguistics or Institut Linguistik SIL – Cawangan Malaysia (now SIL Malaysia). The most extensive linguistic and cultural research among the Timugon, however, has been undertaken by Richard Brewis and Kielo Brewis who as SIL researchers lived in the community for around two decades, producing a proliferation of publications on the language, culture, worldview, and folklore of the people. Since leaving SIL, they have maintained their close ties with the Timugon. One of their more recent publications in Sabah is the collaborative Timugon-Malay dictionary volume with the Timugon entitled *Kamus Murut Timugon - Melayu* (Brewis et.al. 2004).

Unlike most other Murutic peoples, the Timugon had relatively wide contact with outsiders dating back over centuries. They have mostly lived in single dwellings since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and cultivated wet rice as their staple on the plains, while also sometimes planted dry rice in swiddens on the hills. Most Timugon are devout Christians and members of the predominant Roman Catholic church. They have a rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and have successfully maintained their customs and traditions while adapting to change.

This paper discusses some of the traditional Timugon beliefs and practices that are connected to rice cultivation, and also looks at the impact of Christianity on these practices. Recent research on Christian conversion among indigenous Borneo societies illustrated why some Borneo peoples choose to become Christians. Among the Tahol (Tagal) Murut the largest Murutic group, for example, Hakim Abd. Mohad (2011) found that people deliberately chose to become Christians after years of dissatisfaction with harassment by evil spirits, and a desire to be free of the fear of omens. Likewise, Low and Pugh-Kitingan (2015) found that the Kimaragang ethnic group in Sabah chose to become Christians for similar reasons. A similar

dissatisfaction with the spirits and fear of omens had earlier led the Kelabit of Sarawak to become Christians. Kelabit anthropologist Poline Bala (2009) also noted that Christianity reinforced traditional Kelabit values of morality and social harmony.

Thus, in the context of the Timugon Murut this paper asks: what are the traditional beliefs and practices associated with rice cultivation among the Timugon, and how have these been maintained in the Christian context? Moreover at a deeper level, it further asks: what are the traditional Timugon beliefs and values in their worldview that have enabled them to embrace Christianity?

## II . The Timugon

### 2.1. Timugon history and society

The Timugon claim they have always lived in their present location. Their legends tell of a great primordial flood from which only one man survived. He was visited by an angelic being (*masundu*) who created a wife for him from clay and spat red betel nut juice on the clay figure to give it life. This couple were the progenitors of the Timugon (Brewis 1992: 2; 1993: 4-5). Timugon history was marked by bitter headhunting wars with neighbouring groups, especially the Paluan Murut to the east. During the early 1800s, Brunei tax collectors came up the Padas from the coast, and the Timugon were for a time nominally subject to the Sultantate. In 1885, the North Borneo Company administration established Fort Birch where Tenom Town is now located. They forced a peace treaty between the Timugon and the Paluan, constructed the railway line from Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu), and encouraged the planting of cash crops in the District. Then in 1910, Chinese settlers first came to Tenom to take up freehold land. By the 1930s, the Roman Catholic Church was already established in the area (Brewis [1990] 1991: 18-19; 2004: 936-938; Rooney 1981: 57; Woolley ([1936] 2004: 13-15).

The Timugon formerly lived in longhouses (*tulus*) each composed of private family apartments adjoining a public gallery. In

1885, the area had many large longhouses, but by 1921 only two or three remained with most families staying in separate houses. In 1992, in Kampung Pulung, the last remaining *tulus* burned down due to faulty wiring. Longhouses declined over the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to several factors including a widespread smallpox epidemic across northern Borneo from 1904 to 1905 and the issuance of land titles for individual plots by the North Borneo Company (Brewis [1990] 1991: 15, 18; 2004: 945-946; Lebar 1972: 155-156 Lebar 1972: 155-156; Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 33).

Timugon society is non-stratified and egalitarian without hereditary positions of leadership, and has gender balance. In former times, brave men were renowned as warriors and headhunters based on their personal attributes, while certain gifted women were highly esteemed as *babalian* or priestesses in the traditional Timugon religion. Slavery as a result of warfare was a common practice in the past, but has since disappeared (Brewis [1990]1991: 15; Lebar 1972: 158).

Marriage in Timugon society is legalized by the payment of bridewealth (*mulo*) from the husband's family to that of the wife. It is a redistributive bridewealth system in which the father of the husband-to-be collects many objects of wealth from his relatives and distributes them to the father of the bride, who then redistributes the articles to his own kindred (Pugh-Kitingan 2012a: 104-105). The rule of exogamy prohibiting marriage between close relatives extends to fifth cousins, and post-nuptial residence is normally virilocal or in the village of the husband.

The *mansubak* exchange practiced among the northern Timugon in villages along the Pegalan River enables a man to maintain contact with his outmarrying distant female relative, if he did not receive any portion of her bridewealth when it was distributed by her father. *Mansubak* is an exchange between two married couples, in which the man in one couple is distantly related to the wife in the other couple. The items in the exchange, which extends over seven years, are seven sacks of rice and a water buffalo. The man sends a sack of rice each year to his female relative. At the end of seven years, he holds a feast for all his

consanguineal and affinal kin. After this, the woman's husband gives him a buffalo. In *mansuabak*, rice symbolizes women who leave their villages of their birth in marriage and also take care of the rice crops, while buffaloes represent men who normally reside permanently in their villages (Brewis [1990]1991: 27-34; 2004: 949-955).

Social solidarity through forming networks of alliances through exchanges and feasting, as in giving the *mulo* and in *mansubak*, are important in Timugon society. The consumption of rice and rice wine is the most significant element in feasting and social exchange, because rice was created by Aki Kapuuno' (the eternal Creator Spirit) as food for humans (who have eternal spirits), and it also has an eternal spirit *ambiluo ra bilor* (Brewis 1992: 7-10; 1993: 6-7; 2004: 978-984).

## 2.2. Timugon cosmology and worldview

There is not room here to give a full description of Timugon cosmology which has been thoroughly researched by others (Brewis 1992, 1993, 2004: 973-995; Gintod 1982). The following summary is to enhance the discussion about the Timugon, their traditional worldview and rice cultivation.

According to traditional Timugon beliefs, the universe was created by I Aki Kupuuno' (where *i* is an honorific indicating a person's name) or Aki Kapuuno', the "Grandfather of Beginnings." He created everything, including humans and rice, which has its own spirit *ambiluor ra bilor*. Aki Kapuuno' is good and kind to mankind. He longs for fellowship with humans, and sometimes appears on earth (Brewis 1992: 2, 1993: 4; 2004: 974-975).

The universe is envisaged as a multilayered sphere, that consists of the earth or *Tana'*, surrounded by seven cosmic layers. Above the earth lie four layers of *Intangan* or the "Middle World," and beyond it are three layers of *Rasawat*, the "Upper World." Below the earth, lie seven layers of *Ragana* or the "Underworld." Beyond all these upper and lower worlds is the eighth layer of *Nabalu*, the "Afterworld" or the "Eighth World" from the number *walu* or eight (Brewis 1992: 3, 15; 1993: 2-3; 2004: 973-974).

The various parts of the cosmos are inhabited by different beings. Humans live on earth. *Intangan* and *Rasawat* are inhabited by benevolent angelic beings or *masundu'*. When good people die, their eternal spirits are escorted safely to *Nabalu* by the *masundu'* in each layer of *Intangan* and *Rasawat*. Life in *Nabalu* was believed to be much like life on earth, except that everything is easy without war, famine, or illness (Brewis 1992: 4, 1993: 13-14; 2004: 975-976).

*Ragana*, below the earth, is inhabited by demons or *riwato* that come up to earth to harass and inflict suffering on humans. They also inhabit certain places in forests and strange rock formations. When bad people die, their eternal spirits are dragged by *riwato* into the seven layers of *Ragana*. Trapped in *Ragana*, they can never escape to *Nabalu*. Thus, *Nabalu* is the abode of the spirits of good people who have died. But beyond *Nabalu* and all the other cosmic layers, lives Aki Kapuuno' who created everything (Brewis 1992: 3, 1993: 7-8; 2004: 975-976).

The human being, the most complex of all created beings, consists of six parts. The *guang* is the inmost being or true essence of personhood. Apart from the human, no other created being has a *guang*. The only other being in the universe that has a *guang* is the Creator Himself, Aki Kapuuno'. The *inan* or body is an extension of the *guang*, while the *saliguo* or earth spirit is the part of a human that stays on earth after death. The *painawo'* ("breath") or life force is attached to the *inan* by a thin thread, and wanders around while a person sleeps, thus having adventures that form dreams. The *ambiluo* is the eternal spirit of a human that lives on after death and hopefully goes to *Nabalu*. Beyond these, each person has two names or *inggalan*. The first is used throughout life. But when someone dies, they are referred to by their second name until the mourning period is over. Formerly, it was feared that the spirit of the deceased might linger and haunt the living if it heard its name (Brewis 1992: 5-7; 1993: 5; 2004: 975).

The Timugon traditionally believed that life on earth is a struggle between good and evil. Demons, black magic, attacks by enemies, and bad omens were greatly feared. Living alone was considered dangerous, because people need other humans for

protection against enemies and evil spirits. Thus, maintaining social harmony through exchanges with feasting on rice and rice wine was essential for survival.

### **2.3. Creation of rice, the rice spirit and guardian spirits of the padi**

Kielo Brewis notes that there are two origin myths about the creation of the rice plant among the Timugon. She recounts the first to illustrate the importance of respecting rice.

In ancient times, the Timugon ate sago as a staple and the rice plant was just grass. A *masundu'* came to earth and offered a new tasty food, explaining that they could also have this by boiling the leaves of the rice plant in a pot. They were not to open the pot until the food was cooked. An impatient young man, however, disobeyed and opened the pot only to find uncooked, unhusked rice (*bilor*) inside. From then on, people had to learn to sow, plant, weed, harvest, thresh, pound, and winnow the grain, before they could cook and eat it. Since rice has an eternal spirit or *ambiluo* like humans, it must be treated with respect. Although most of the rituals to strengthen the rice crop have disappeared, women planting rice seedlings in wet rice cultivation are careful to fill the whole section where they are working. If they leave any row empty, it will offend the *ambiluo ra bilor* who will not dwell in that section (Brewis 1992: 10-11; 1993: 12-13; 2004: 978-979).

The second myth concerning the creation of rice is recounted by Gintod (1982:164). Since Aki Kapuuno' realized that the plants he created were unsuitable as staple food for humans, he sacrificed his daughter by butchering her body. Each part of her body was then miraculously transformed into a type of padi. As a result, the Timugon consume various types of rice. This myth is akin to rice creation myths among Dusunic peoples.

Apart from the *ambiluo ra bilor* or spirit of the rice, the Timugon also traditionally believe that there are many *bambalai* or guardian spirits that care for the padi plants. Each type of rice has its own guardian spirit or *bambalai*. Respecting them will ensure a bountiful harvest. If they are offended, they will abandon the field resulting in a poor yield.



### III. Traditional Rice Planting Practices, Omens and Rituals

#### 3.1. Timugon rice cultivation

The Timugon traditionally plant wet rice on the plains with some dry rice on the hills. It appears that their older socioeconomic activities revolved around the swidden agriculture of hill rice, with sago and cassava, at least from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Their diet was supplemented with wild game, fish, birds, and wild vegetables and fruits. Wet rice cultivation and water buffaloes were introduced just before the coming of Europeans, probably due to trading contacts with Dusunic peoples from the Keningau and Tambunan areas to the northeast of the Timugon. With the coming of the Chinese in 1910 and the issuance of individual land titles by the North Borneo Company administration that ensured land could be handed on to future generations, wet rice agriculture on the plains became the norm. Some families, however, still continued hill rice cultivation on nearby slopes as a back-up (Brewis [1991]1990: 17; Lebar 1972; Rutter 1929; Woolley 1936).

This practice continues today. According to Justine G. Sikui, the Coordinator of the Padi Planting Development for Tenom District under the Tenom branch of the Agricultural Department (pers. comm. 10 August 2011), there are a total of 2,476.4 hectares of wet padi fields and 350 hectares of dry hill padi in the whole Tenom District. Wet and dry padi fields comprise 13% of the total agricultural planting land as compared to rubber at 48% and oil palm at 23%. Of rice planting, 95% of the padi cultivation in Tenom is wet padi, found mostly in the Melalap area among the Timugon. The remaining 5% is for dry padi cultivation which involves both Timugon and Tahol Murut farmers. Nowadays, in Tenom District, wet padi fields are planted twice in a calendar year, while dry padi fields are planted once a year. Swiddens for dry padi are still cleared with slash-and-burn techniques (Tenom District Agricultural Department, 10 August 2011).

Twelve Timugon informants were interviewed for this study. Each had more than five years padi planting experience for both dry and wet rice, and many have been farmers all their lives. Most

learned about traditional hill padi planting from their parents or grandparents. Besides being padi planters, many occasionally hunted for wild game in the forests, and hence are familiar with local fauna. In addition, some are local community leaders whose main duties involve dealing with district or village affairs. Their knowledge of rice cultivation was invaluable in this study.

All twelve informants are Roman Catholics though their grandparents, parents, or they themselves in their youth originally practiced traditional Timugon religion, characterized by rituals and presided over by *babalian*. Consequently, these senior villagers have much knowledge to impart on the impact of the Roman Catholic faith on their traditional animistic padi practices.

Both the wet and dry padi have been the main crops of the Timugon since the time of the informants' great-grand parents and beyond. Planting hill rice is termed *makatindal* whereas *mampalanau* refers to planting wet padi. In the Timugon language, the padi plant is called *puun ru bilor*, paddy grain *bilor*, unhusked padi *bagas*, and cooked rice *kaluu'*.

Before World War II, during the North Borneo Company era, and also later during the British colonial period until 1963, Timugon farmers who wished to plant dry rice were free to clear any nearby hillside as there was no ownership of that land. The first family to clear a patch of a secondary or tertiary hillside jungle had the right to use the clearing. Generally, the clearing was used once or the most twice depending on the fertility of the soil, and thereafter the farmers shifted to another site nearby. Later, the land of the first clearing could be used by other families. But this is not the case for wet padi land, which was permanently owned by individual families. Thus as among the Dusunic peoples of Sabah, rights of usage over land for hill padi swiddens constitute circulating usufruct, while rights over wet rice land are devolvable usufruct (Appell 1974, 1976: 35-56; Pugh-Kitingan 2012b: 41).

Before the 1960s, when a swidden was no longer fertile, Timugon dry padi planters would search for new sites of secondary or tertiary forest near their village. A site was chosen by examining the height and health of plants growing on the hillside, which

provided signs about the fertility of the soil. When a new site was chosen, the farmer cleared away some bushes at its perimeter creating a border. This action also signaled that the site was booked. This form of “manual booking” was possible as the hillsides were not under any ownership. That was the community’s mutual agreement for generations among the Timugon.

With *makatindai*, dry hill padi is planted once in a calendar year, and farmers did not require a large land area for a swidden. Men cut down the large trees and cleared the undergrowth. Women and children cleared the small twigs. Everything was left to dry out for a few days, then the men fired the swidden, leaving the ground covered with ash. After this, men used large dibble sticks to poke holes in the ground, while the women followed behind and dropped a few rice seeds into each hole.

With *mampalanau* or wet rice cultivation, traditional rice varieties were also formerly planted once each year. Nowadays, with the introduction of rice varieties, two annual plantings are undertaken. As in wet rice cultivation among the Dusun of Tambunan and elsewhere, each family planted seeds in a traditional temporary fenced nursery not far from their house, while their nearby padi field is being prepared. When the seedlings have grown to a certain height, they are uprooted, trimmed, and transplanted into the wet padi field.

Traditionally, dry or wet rice cultivation involved various processes and was imbued with rituals to ensure a bountiful harvest. The Timugon also observed various omens, symbolic practices, and taboos in their rice cultivation.

### **3.2. Omens in hill rice cultivation**

Some informants claimed that animals were created by Aki Kapuuno’ for the wellbeing of humans. Hence, it was also believed that from time to time, various animals and birds conveyed certain good and bad omens to guide people.

When selecting the site for a swidden, meeting a *mondolon* (python) may be either a good or bad *kapio* (omen) to farmers. If

the python is found coiled while resting, it is a good omen. The farmer will start clearing a border to book the site. The sound of the noun *mondolon* somewhat resembles the adverb *sumolon* meaning “proud of.” As a good omen, it meant that the farmer is going to receive a bountiful rice yield that will him and his family “proud.” A snake sliding away, however, is a bad omen. The Timugon traditional burial houses built over graves are decorated with patterns that resemble a python’s skin. Also, the body of the python, when straightened, looks like a corpse lying on the ground. In this case, the omen is of death. Upon seeing this, the farmer abandons the site and seeks a new planting location elsewhere. Other farmers who set foot on the same site, and who do not encounter any bad omens may consider the place acceptable for planting hill rice.

Other than snakes, the Timugon were also wary when encountering a *paus* or barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), or a *sampalili* or Western tarsier (*Tarsius bancanus*) on their way to the swidden to work. They believed that the seeing a *paus* (or hearing its bark) or a *sampalili* spells misfortune. The informant Runion binti Andik explained that the noun *sampalili* sounds like the adjective *mangkailili* which in the Timugon language means “as though (one is) going to die soon,” and the barks of the *paus* sound like people crying. Both the sound of the word *sampalili* and the barking sound of the deer are deemed bad omens. In terms of appearance, Gintod’s (1982:121) informants reveal that the reddish color of the *paus*’s body looks like fire, which symbolizes burning. If one ignores these omens, the fields may catch fire. In addition, the brownish color of the *paus*’s body looks like the soil and its four legs look like the poles of a gravehouse. These are also death omens. Similarly, many informants in this study said that when encountering a *paus* and a *sampalili*, the best thing for them to do is to forgo a day’s work and return home immediately. Runion binti Andik also added that farmers encountering these animals usually invited a *babalian* (female ritual specialist) to ward off possible misfortune by conducting rituals at the field and the chanting ritual verses.

The noise of the barking deer was also considered ominous among many other native groups in Borneo. For the Kayan in

Sarawak (the neighbouring state to Sabah), hearing the bark of the deer at work in the farm meant that they had to return home and stay for four days (Rousseau, 1998:70). Likewise, some informants from the Lundayeh, an ethnic group originally from Kalimantan, and now residing in Tenom and Sipitang Districts, said that they would call off a day's work if they hear bark of the deer.

Apart from these, the appearance of the *tambang* or Sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*), *pantong* or bullfrog (undetermined species), and *bulukun* or pangolin (*Manis javanica*) are also omens among the Timugon. An encounter with a *tambang* was always considered a bad omen as its skin color looks like a sick padi plant, and its speed when it runs and disappears into the forest is interpreted by the Timugon as early death or passing. Hearing the calls of a *pantong* is also considered a bad omen as its low tuned calls sound like a gong being hit, typically interpreted as a signal for death. Among the Timugon, when someone has just died, a male relative hits a large deep-sounding hanging gong with a special slow beat to inform others about the sad news (Brewis 1987). In addition to that, the calls of the *pantong* are associated with rainfall. Hence it is believed that the sounds of *pantong* may cause unnecessary rainfall that destroys the padi plants.

Seeing a *bulukun*, on the other hand, can be a good or a bad omen when one comes to the swidden. If the *bulukun* is coiling itself and the coil looks big, then the Timugon believe that the rice yield will be bountiful. If the *bulukun* is walking along the ground, however, its body shape looks long like a coffin, and it is a bad omen. This case is very similar to that of the python omen.

The Timugon are also wary about the presence and behavior of certain birds which may be viewed as bad or good omens. These birds may hover or fly around while they are on their way to identify a new planting site or when they go to work in the swidden. The presence of the woodpecker known as *titik baran* (*Sasia abnormis*), commonly found in secondary forests, is very ominous for the traditional Timugon. If a farmer happens to see a *titik baran* either flying across in front of him or perching nearby, it means that someone will meet an accident. If someone sees the *titik baran*

pecking wood without making any noise, it means that he may be cursed and may die. At the sight of these bad omens, a farmer will call off a day's work.

The calls of the *titik baran*, however, can be a good or a bad omen. Upon hearing one "tik" call from the bird on their way to work, farmers will immediately stop, rest for a while, and wait for its second "tik" call. The sound of the second "tik" means that the bad omen has become a good omen, and they can continue their journey to the swidden. If they do not hear the second *titik baran* call, they will call off the day's work. The worst case, however, is when the *titik baran* calls continuously "tik, tik, tik, tik..." According to informants Thomas bin Lakai and Dulatip bin Guntan, such calls are known as *mantangit*, which sounds like the word *manangit*, meaning crying. When they encounter this bad omen, they immediately return home.

Besides *titik baran*, the calls of three other birds, the *sagap* or banded kingfisher (*Lacedo pulchella melanops*), the *kisi* or crested jay (*Platylophus galericulatus*), and the *manganapi* (unknown classification), were also believed by the Timugon to be both good and bad omens. The *sagap* calls "sa-a-gap" - "sa-a-gap" - "sa-a-gap," then pauses for a short while. Usually after a while, the calls are repeated. Upon hearing the first set of calls, farmers immediately stopped, rested, and waited for the second set. The sound of the second set of calls indicated that they may proceed. If it is not heard, danger is said to await, and all must return home immediately.

The cries of the *kisi* or crested jay began with "cit" - "cit" - "cit" for a couple of times, followed by "crrk" - "crrk" - "crrk," until they stopped. If farmers hear the "cit" pattern without the following "crrk" sound, it may mean smooth or rainy work. If the farmers only hear the "crrk" sound, an accident awaits one of them on their way to the swidden. The complete round of calls from the *kisi* must be heard before proceeding.

The calls of the *manganapi* sound like "kik, kik, kik, kik - kik, kik, kik, kik" followed by "kik, kik, kik, kik - kik - kik, kik, kik - kik, kik, kik kik." As with calls of the *kisi*, farmers must hear the

complete set of *mangangpai* calls or danger will follow them (Gintod, 1982: 128).

Of all the birdcall omens, that of the *titik baran* is the most feared among the Timugon. Cautionary reminders abound. Many informants shared that this belief came from their forefathers who personally experienced or had seen village folk suffering from unwanted consequences after ignoring those omens. It is interesting to note that in these practices, the outcomes may be changed from bad to good.

When discussing this relationship between omens and events, Rousseau (1998:73) illustrated how the Kayan in Sarawak changed the outcome of certain omens. When travelers noticed an ominous bird about to cross their path as they rowed along a river, for example, they turned the boat around and hence made the encounter into a good omen. For the Timugon, when hearing a call from an ominous bird, people stopped, rested, and waited for the next call, in the hope for a good one. This gave them a chance to not waste a day's work. There were also ways to change the outcome of certain animal omens. If they encountered a *tambang* (*Rusa unicolor*), for example, they will hunt and kill it to ward off a poor harvest or early death. Since the traditional Timugon belief system indicated that various types of animals and birds may be good or bad omens, it was up to people to interpret the signs and act accordingly. Omens were not necessarily rigid warning signs. Outcomes may be changed.

### **3.3. Symbolic practices and taboos in rice cultivation**

Apart from following omens, Timugon farmers also conducted symbolic practices to ensure successful harvest in the cultivation of both dry and wet rice. Whenever a person dies in the village, the Timugon farmers will not go to the field to work until the deceased is buried. Besides showing respect to the deceased's family, the condition of the deceased's mouth (*kabang*) is said to be *apol* or without expression, unable to produce words. Thus, they believe that if work is conducted at this time, it will also produce nothing. Abstinence from work during mourning, as a mark of respect,

continues to be observed by the Timugon and by other indigenous Sabahan cultures today.

According to several wet padi cultivators, when transferring the young plants from the nursery to the padi field, they also brought along four types of plants: the *babas*, a leafy wild plant (unknown species), a young *lumbio* or sago plant (*Metroxylon spp.*), *sagumau* or lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) and a *lupit* or bemban plant (*Donax arundastrum*). Prior to the replanting of the young padi shoots, the farmers planted these other plants as symbols near the location where water flows into the padi field. They believed that the *babas* plant prevented accidents from happening to them, in case they inadvertently disobeyed any previous omens. The young *lumbio* protected their padi plants from disease. The *sagumau* plant helped their padi shoots to grow healthily just like a bundle of lemon grass. And the small *lupit* tree symbolically cooled down the growing padi plants. For Timugon farmers, heat is not good for padi plants (see also Gintod, 1982: 168).

Woolley (2004[1936]: 55) also reported that the planting season for wet padi was determined by the *tembalang* (Malay) bamboo. When the bamboo shoots sprouted plentifully, the padi grains were planted in nurseries near the houses in the village, while the fields were prepared. When the grains sprouted into young seedlings, they were transferred from the nurseries to be replanted in the fields. For hill padi, Woolley reported that the seeds were planted when the *patai* trees, which are deciduous, were appearing in full leaf.

According to the informants in this study, when the padi plants began to produce seeds, there was a ritual prohibition against taking food, knives, and coconuts to the padi field before *Mumuk* or *Mamata* rituals were conducted (see below). Sharp objects like knives brought to the padi field at this time also offended the guardian padi spirits. It is believed that whoever broke this taboo will meet an accident or later fall sick. Also at this time, farmers were not allowed to eat white colored food like coconut flesh or white cakes in the field. This taboo is related to the *Mumuk* and *Mamata* rituals where foods offered to the guardian rice spirits were white in color. These spirits must be served first. After harvesting



the crop, everyone was prohibited from shouting, clapping, or making loud noises near the grain storage barn. It is believed that loud noises disturbed the spirit of the rice and irritated the guardian rice spirits, causing them to leave the storage barn, leaving the grains to rot or eaten by rodents.

### 3.4. Lunar stages and rice planting

In earlier times, the Timugon observed the stages of the moon when deciding to sow their rice seeds. According to informants, seeds should not be sown between the period of the new moon to full moon. This was observed by both wet padi farmers sowing the seeds in the nursery and hill padi farmers planting seeds in their hillside swiddens. One informant reported: “as the size of the new moon is small, I worry that the yield of my padi will be sparse later.” Another reason is that the new moon is also described as *ibol*, which means “time to come out.” It is feared that the rice seeds will “merely come out” with husks with no grain inside.

Timugon names for the phases of the moon symbolically influence times chosen for rice planting. When the moon appears round but is not yet full, its shape is described as *mangulor*. The Timugon avoid planting at this time, because the sound of this word is similar to *ulor* or caterpillar. Caterpillars destroy crops by eating the internal stems of rice plants. Hence, planting during this time may result in rice crops being destroyed by caterpillars. The word *mangulor* also sounds like the phrase *pangulor-gulor mato*, which means a dead person with the eyes wide open. Thus, Timugon farmers avoid planting padi when the moon is *mangulor*.

The full moon is called *salawang*. If planting occurs on this day, the Timugon believe that there are two possible outcomes: either their crops will be destroyed by the rats, as the word *salawang* sounds like the phrase *pansalawangon do kokot*, or “eaten by rats from one side to another,” or the harvest will be bountiful as the moon is at its full shape. Despite the latter interpretation, most Timugon farmers avoid risking their crops being destroyed and do not plant at full moon. Before, planting rice once a year produced a sufficient yield and fed a family for a few years.

Destruction of crops by pests, however, resulted in insufficiency of supply and consequently, lack of food.

The fourth day after the full moon is known as *kundugan*. Although there is no perceived danger to the crop by planting on this day, most farmers choose not to plant then, as *kundugan* is still considered close to *salawang*. The best time to start planting is from the fifth day after the full moon onwards until before the new moon appears again. This illustrates the care taken by the Timugon to guard their staple rice crops from the beginning, as it was given by the Creator and has its own eternal spirit or *ambiluo ra bilor*.

### 3.5. Ritual practices in rice harvesting

There are three related rituals connected to harvesting: *Mumuk*, *Mamata*, and *Tinapaian*. Both *Mumuk* and *Mamata* are conducted when the padi grains are almost ripe just before harvest. If the padi yield in a particular year is normal, *Mumuk* will be conducted. But if the yield is bountiful, *Mamata* will be conducted instead.

Usually, the *Mumuk* and *Mamata* rituals are handled by a woman, especially the mother in the family. According to informants Runion binti Antik and Eren binti Apok, who conducted these rituals for years, *Mumuk* is simpler than *Mamata*. The purposes of both rituals are to show respect for the padi guardian spirits or *bambalai*, and to ensure the family's safety before harvesting begins. After completing the rituals, the family can bring food to the padi field to eat as the *bambalai* have already had their share.

In *Mumuk*, the mother goes to the padi field and selects about 30 healthy padi cuttings to be taken home. Once home, the padi grains are separated from their stalks and fried. After frying, the cooked rice grains are pounded to separate grains from husks. The fried grains are then sowed outside around the perimeter of the house. The *Mumuk* ritual is conducted during daytime. While sowing, she says:

“We take the rice to make *mumuk* especially for you. After this offering, allow us to bring knives and food to work in the padi field. Please do not get angry with us as we have given you the *mumuk*.”

Preparations for *Mamata* begin at night. The mother goes to the padi field to select and cut a quantity of cuttings to be taken home. The number of cuttings is more than for the *Mumuk* ritual. Upon reaching home, the grains are separated from their stalks, pounded to separate husks from the grain, then fried. After this, the grains are further pounded into fine grains. These grains are then soaked in the juice of a young coconut earlier cut in half. Before the sun rises, the coconut shell containing the soaked rice grains is closed with the other half of the shell. This is then brought to the middle of the padi field and placed on bamboo supports. As she arranges this offering, the mother says:

“There you are—this is your share of rice which is more than our share. Please do not get angry with us and ensure us a bountiful harvest in future.”

After the *Mamata* ceremony, the farmers can bring their harvesting knives and food to the padi field and harvesting may begin.

On the first day of harvesting, the farmers conduct another ritual known as *Tinapaian*. Prior to the harvest-time, they go to the field to cut enough padi for brewing *tapai* rice wine. When it is ready, the *tapai* is poured into a bamboo container and fitted with a padi stalk as a straw. This is then placed in a hut built at the padi field on the first day of harvesting. While doing so the farmer says: “Let us have a drink together.” According to the informants, this ceremony aims to ensure that their day’s work in the padi field will proceed smoothly as the padi guardian spirits have their share of drinks.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the two traditional Timugon rice planting systems were influenced by omens and taboos, and included symbolic practices and rituals. These observances and practices arose from their traditional beliefs passed down over generations. The coming of Christianity to the Timugon through the Roman Catholic mission in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century transformed Timugon life for the better by directly causing the cessation of warfare and headhunting, and bringing peace and

genuine friendship with former enemies. It introduced literacy, education and medical assistance, and freed people from the deep fear of demons, curses, black magic and bad omens. But it also brought changes in ritual practices associated with rice cultivation.

#### **IV. Impact of Christianity and other factors on Timugon rice rituals**

The presence of Christian missionary activity in Borneo dates back to 1322, and there were many further developments over the centuries, especially in coastal areas (George 1981:468; Pugh-Kitingan 2015: 284-286; Rooney 1981: 3-5). It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, that Roman Catholic missionary explorers ventured into the interior of Sabah, often at great risk to their lives. Later, other missions followed. By the 1930s, the Roman Catholic Church was already established in Tenom (Rooney 1981: 57). Missionaries established schools and medical outposts. They lived with the people and understood their culture. They also experienced suffering along with local people during World War II. Today, most Timugon are Roman Catholics and their clergy are all Sabahan, while a few are members of other Christian denominations, and some still follow traditional religion. A minority has more recently converted to Islam due to intermarriage with other ethnic groups.

All the Timugon informants interviewed in this research are Roman Catholics, but in their youth followed the old ritual practices and observances in hill and wet padi cultivation. There are various reasons why the Timugon chose to become Christians.

Firstly, there are fundamental conceptual similarities between the traditional Timugon belief system and Christian belief. The ancient Timugon concept of God named *Aki Kapuuno'* is very similar to the God of the Bible. His role as the Creator of everything in the universe is essentially the same with the Christian God. His benevolence towards human beings is similar to God's love for mankind. Similarly, *masundu'* are good celestial beings like angels, while *riwato* are demons who rebelled against God and are

malevolent towards mankind, as in Biblical teaching. The idea that Aki Kapuuno' has a *guang* and each human also has a *guang* is akin to the Biblical concept that mankind was created in the image of God. Similarly, the belief that Aki Kapuuno' is the eternal Creator Spirit or *Ambiluo* and that humans also have *ambiluo* or eternal spirits, is essentially the same as in Biblical teaching. Although not exactly the same, the ideas of *Nabalu'* and *Ragana* are somewhat similar to Christian concepts of Heaven and Hell.

Secondly, desired Christian behavior fits the ideal of traditional Timugon social practice. Timugon society is classless and egalitarian, and the importance of the conjugal family, kinship unity and social harmony is analogous to Christian brotherly love as enjoined in the Bible. Christian Timugon maintain their social traditions and obligations. For example, they continue to marry with *mulo* or bridewealth, which is handed over a few days before the Christian wedding ceremony, followed by feasting in the villages of the bride and then the groom. The *mansubak* exchange also continues to be practiced by Christians in the northern part of Tenom District, and see it as a means of drawing distant kin closer and promoting social harmony. It is also important for introducing children to their mothers' relatives, to avoid violating customary laws of unknowingly marrying their close cousins (Brewis [1990]1991: 34).

Apart from this, following Jesus Christ has brought freedom from the fear of omens, bad consequences and the anger of the spirits. As one of the Timugon farmers said:

“As a Catholic, I am taught not to believe in bad omens. If I encounter one, I will make a cross sign and continue my journey to the planting field.”

These words show that converts have confidence in God's protection against bad omens rooted in their old animistic beliefs. In some cases, they seek Catholic catechists to say prayers in their padi field, sprinkle holy water around the sites, and erect a cross at the edge. If the field is large, two crosses will be erected, one at each end of the padi field.

It is clear that the fear of bad omens is still there. But the

Christian way to deal with such portents is more practical and beneficial, as the farmers concerned need not call off a day's work or invite a *babalian* to conduct a cumbersome ceremony that involved lengthy ritual chanting and a sacrifice of chicken, all of which had to be paid for in rice or gifts to the ritual specialist. When confronted with bad omens nowadays, farmers make the sign of the cross, pray, and then continue working. They are confident that God is omnipotent against omens and accidents in the field.

The fear of the anger of the spirits has now been displaced as people seek God's protection and blessing in rice cultivation. Instead of the relying on symbolic practices and rituals that appease the padi guardian spirits, many Timugon nowadays bring small quantities of rice seeds to church to be blessed by the priest after Sunday mass. These blessed seeds are then brought home and mixed with other padi seeds for planting in the next season. Some people even bring young padi seedlings to be blessed in church before they are re-planted in the field. Such new practices are obviously the outcome of Christian belief that God's power is greater than that of the unseen spirits. By doing so, the Timugon are confident that God will protect their padi plants. Hence, many of the old practices and spirit rituals are no longer needed. Moreover, the Church leaders prohibit them from conducting practices and ceremonies that are against Catholicism, such as invoking or sacrificing to spirits.

Nevertheless, as discussed below, the traditional knowledge of planting according the phases of the moon, checking on the rice crops before harvesting, and also looking out on the appearance of certain birds and animals as indications of dry weather and wet spells, still continues. This is despite the contemporary use of calendars and information on modern rice varieties introduced by the Department of Agriculture. Today, many Christian mothers still go to the rice fields to check whether the rice grains have ripened for harvest, as in the practices of *Mumuk* and *Mamanta*. They pray to God in the padi field and, as discussed, the selected cut rice stalks are brought home and kept for planting the first seeds in the following season. The concept of rice as having a spiritual essence or *ambiluo ra bilor* given by the Creator, and of respect for rice and

for nature continues among Christian Timugon. The social importance of sharing rice as food or wine as a sign of solidarity also continues among Timugon Christians.

The non-Christian Timugon farmers continue to believe that padi guardian spirits protect their padi plants and ensure a bountiful harvest. But nowadays, the Timugon Catholic farmers, through in-situ prayers of a catechist and the erection of crosses, have handed over their padi plants and yields to God's care. These practices in conducting rituals for padi guardian spirits and Catholic ceremonies are psychologically and functionally similar. Both religious practices involve rituals to seek supernatural help. Psychologically speaking, the people feel safer and have the sense of security after conducting those ceremonies. And the function of both types of ceremonies ensure bountiful harvests.

Chua (2009), who studied the old and Christian practices of the Bidayuh ethnic group in the neighboring state of Sarawak, had among others, reported that in the case of the Christian Bidayuh padi planters, crosses have replaced *gawai* ritual barriers and rice stalks are blessed at special church services held around harvest time. As he suggests (Chua 2009: 336), *adat gawai* (old Bidayuh customs and practices) and Christianity are fundamentally ways of getting things done - staying safe, encouraging a bountiful harvest, or ensuring a safe journey. We too find that the Timugon old practices as Catholic rituals are fundamentally ways of getting things done.

There are also cases of some old practices being retained by Timugon Catholic farmers, such as the timing of sowing padi seeds in the swidden or of transferring young padi plants from the nursery to wet paddy field based on the appearance of the moon. These traditional agricultural practices are not necessarily anti-Christian or un-Biblical, but reflect an older form of rice cultivation based on traditional knowledge. "It is up to us—we may choose to follow or not to follow," said some of our informants. The Catholic farmers concerned feel that such practices do not affect their Catholic faith but some feel that following them may be wrong in Catholic teaching. Similarly, Koepping (2006: 69) in her research regarding

Anglican Christian converts in Bakas village among Sabah's Eastern Kadazan (Labuk Dusun), found that there are some farmers who although professing to be Christians, retain a deep awareness of and respect for the older practices while they feel following these is wrong in church terms.

Similarly, some of the informants felt that religious belief is a faith but traditional practices like conducting *Mumuk*, *Mamata* and *Tinapaian* ceremonies are merely cultural customs handed down over generations. These people do not feel that it is sinful to practice these, although the Church strictly prohibits such rituals. Most strong Timugon Catholics, however, have long abandoned those ceremonies. Ranti bin Surangking, Apah binti Maulur, and Majius bin Rondih, for example, said that their parents continued to conduct those ceremonies until the 1970s when they ceased. Nowadays when their padi is almost ripe, they go to the field to cut and bring home some selected padi cuttings. They call this the "first harvest." After returning home, they tie some the "first harvest" padi stalks to one of the upright poles in the house. The remainder of the "first harvest" is distributed to neighbors. By doing so, they have announced to their neighbors that their fields are ready to be harvested. To them, this symbolic practice does not go against Catholic teaching. Thus, perceptions that certain customs are not sinful, indicate how conversion does not necessarily involve a radical shift in one's belief system.

Apart from Christian conversion, there are many other modern factors that have caused a decline in the old agricultural practices of the Timugon. Nowadays, most farmers' plant cash crops like coconut, rubber, and more recently, oil palm, all of which do not involve old agriculture practices. Also, the Timugon farmers who plant wet padi, including new rice varieties, used pesticides, fertilizer and harvesting machines for decades. As a result of these modern methods and technologies of rice cultivation, many informants claimed that they receive good harvests without following the old ritual practices.



## V. Conclusions

From the foregoing, it can be seen that Timugon Murut traditional rice cultivation is not merely the production of a food product for consumption, but is actually a sacred process in which each phase is imbued with ritual, based on the belief in the Creator Aki Kapuuno'. He created everything, including the cosmos, mankind, rice that has an eternal spirit or *ambiluo ra bilor*, padi guardian spirits or *bambalai*, animals, and birds. From His benevolence towards humans, He provided rice as the staple food for mankind. Rice must be treated with respect because of its spiritual aspect that has come from the Creator, and because it is the staple crop for the survival of humans. Without rice, the staple food, humans will starve and perish. Animals were also created for the wellbeing of humans, and some birds and animals may serve to provide omens in rice cultivation. Phases of the moon were used as symbolic indicators for the opportune times when to plant and harvest rice in bygone eras before the use of modern calendars. Because of the importance of rice as food and due to the delicate balance between the complexity of its cultivation process, the natural environment and favorable conditions for crop maturation, rituals were also conducted to the *bambalai* to avert their anger and ensure a bountiful harvest.

Rice as the Timugon staple, is not merely a food to be eaten, but is important in establishing social harmony and unity. When people eat rice and drink rice wine together during feasts at social exchanges, such as in the *mansubak*, they are articulating social solidarity through kinship and through new alliances formed with non-kin. This social unity was extremely important in bygone times before the coming of Christianity, when the Timugon lived in constant fear of attacks by neighboring headhunting enemies, or from hidden personal enemies within the community who secretly practiced black magic, and especially from *riwato* the demons that harassed humans with illness, crop failure, and disasters.

With the coming of Christianity in the form of Roman Catholicism, many Timugon recognized the similarity of the God of the Bible with Aki Kapuuno', as well as the importance of traditional social cohesion as exemplified by both Christianity and folk culture,

but began to question the older beliefs in burdensome omens and ritual practices. Although some continued to follow these, many believed that the God of the Bible provided protection from the effects of bad omens and the anger of evil spirits. They substituted older ritual practices with their own symbolic practices. Others continued with the older rituals as culture, while adhering to Roman Catholicism.

Despite changes in the ritual aspects of traditional Timugon rice cultivation due to the coming of Christianity, the recent introduction of new crops and, nowadays, education, there is continuity in worldview and basic agricultural practices. As Christians, the Timugon continue to hold fast to their belief in Aki Kapuuno' who provided for them. They continue to cultivate rice as their staple, treating it with respect because it was created with a spiritual essence and is for the benefit of mankind. They also continue to participate in important social exchanges and feasts based on the consumption of rice as food and wine.

Thus, although the Timugon have experienced many technological and development changes over the past century, they have continued and adapted aspects of their culture to new situations. This cultural continuity has ensured the maintenance of their distinctive ethnic identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

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### **Informants:**

**Note:** The word “bin” in the middle of the name denotes a male, while “binti” denotes a female.

1) Informant: OKK David Jani

Age: 57

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon

Profession: District Chief of Tenom District

Venue: Kampung Entabuan, Tenom (“Kampung” means village)

Date: 08 August 2011

Note: OKK (Short form for *Orang Kaya-Kaya* in Malay. This is the former title given to the District Head in Sabah state) David Jani has had helped his deceased father planting hill paddy for more than five years in the 1960s.

2) Informant: KAN Laurence Apok

Age: 55

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon  
Profession: Native Chief of Tenom District  
Venue: Kampung Mandalom Baru, Tenom  
Date: 08 August 2011

Note: KAN (Short form for *Ketua Anak Negeri* in Malay. This is the title given to the Native Chiefs in Sabah state) Laurence Apok has had helped his deceased father planting hill paddy from the period of 1968 to 1979.

3) Informant: Juking bin Kilan  
Age: 68  
Ethnicity: Murut Timugon  
Profession: Farmer/Village Headman (1987-1997)  
Venue: Kampung Bunut, Tenom  
Date: 09 August 2011

Note: This informant has twenty years of experience in planting paddy.

4) Informant: Thomas bin Lakai  
Age: 78  
Ethnicity: Murut Timugon  
Profession: Village Headman/Farmer  
Venue: Kampung Sawang, Melalap, Tenom  
Date: 10 August 2011

Note: This informant has started planting paddy in the 1950s and still doing so to date.

5) Informant: Dulatip bin Guntan  
Age: 72  
Ethnicity: Murut Timugon  
Profession: Village Headman/Farmer  
Venue: Kampung Kasia, Melalap, Tenom  
Date: 10 August 2011

Note: This Informant has started planting paddy since the 1950s until the present days.

6) Informant: Runion binti Antik

Age: 72

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon

Profession: Farmer

Venue: Kampung Mandalom Baru, Tenom

Date: 11 August 2011

7) Informant: Erin binti Apok

Age: 60

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon

Profession: Farmer

Venue: Kampung Mandalom Baru, Tenom

Date: 11 August 2011

8) Informant: Magillu bin Apok

Age: 63

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon

Profession: Penanam padi sawah dan padi bukit

Venue: Kampung Mandalom Baru, Tenom

Date: 11 August 2011

9) Informant: Majews @Majius bin Rondih

Age: 71

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon

Profession: Pesara Guru/Penanam padi sawah

Venue: Kampung Simpangan, Tenom

Date: 12 August 2011

10) Informant: Ranti bin Surangking

Age: 61

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon

Profession: Retired teacher/Farmer

Venue: Kampung Langsung, Melalap, Tenom

Date: 12 August 2011

11) Informant: Apah binti Maulor

Age: 56

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon

Profession: Retired teacher/Farmer

Venue: Kampung Langsung, Melalap, Tenom

Date: 12 August 2011

12) Informant: Lucas Umbul (Ph.D)

Age: 52

Ethnicity: Murut Timugon

Profession: Lecturer in the Institute of Teacher Training, Keningau, Sabah/Ex paddy planter

Venue: Melalap, Tenom

Date: 15 August 2011

13) Informant: Justine bin G. Sikui

Age: 47

Ethnicity: Kadazan Dusun

Profession: Coordinator of Padi Development for Tenom District

Venue: Tenom town

Date: 10 August 2011

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