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# Exploring Indigenous Spirituality: The Religio-Cultural Background of the Indigenous Peoples of Sabah

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## Abstract

The indigenous peoples in Sabah, Malaysia, who comprise diverse ethnic communities such as the Kadazandusun, Murut, Rungus, Lundayeh, and Bajau are identified as *bumiputera* (Sanskrit: *bhumiputra*), which means “sons of the land” or “sons of the soil.” There are many traditional stories about the belief systems of the indigenous peoples of Sabah which are not documented but only transmitted through oral tradition. These stories are quite similar and yet distinct from one another depending on each particular ethnic group. This article discusses the religious and cultural background of the indigenous peoples of Sabah, specifically the Eastern Kadazandusun, in an attempt to explore their spirituality.

## Keywords

indigenous peoples, Kadazandusun, *Kinoringan*, *bobohizan* (spiritual ritualist), spirits, *sogit* (sacrifice), *tatod* (human soul), *adat* (customary law), *mongitabang* (sense of community)

Prior to the coming of Islam and Christianity to Sabah, the word “religion” was foreign to the indigenous peoples. There was no word for “religion” in the vocabulary of the indigenous peoples since their religious or spiritual life was integrated into their culture.<sup>1</sup> The indigenous peoples’ distinctive worldview was characterized by their unique cultural patterns, social institutions, and legal system.

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1 *Adat* can be seen as their traditional ideology since *adat* governs life. When the missionaries introduced Christianity, or the “new religion,” *adat* became the “old religion.” As a result, the missionaries challenged the universality of *adat*.

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## OVERVIEW OF THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

There are many traditional stories about the belief systems of the indigenous peoples<sup>2</sup> that are not documented and only transmitted through oral tradition. These stories are quite similar and yet distinct from one another depending on each particular ethnic group. They might be considered as monotheistic since there is a belief in a supreme being. But since their religious practices focus on pleasing and appeasing various spirits, animism is a more appropriate category.<sup>3</sup> Owen Rutter<sup>4</sup> wrote:

Although the pagans [*sic*] are, up to a point, monotheists, animism plays an important part in their daily lives. For them almost every rock and tree and stream has a spirit,<sup>5</sup> usually of evil, to be propitiated. Most sickness, certainly all epidemics such as cholera and smallpox, are the work of the spirits.<sup>6</sup>

To set the context of this article, it is important to study the religious and cultural background of the indigenous peoples of Sabah in order to highlight the predominant features of their life and spirituality.

The indigenous peoples shared an animistic belief system that provided a variety of religious customs and practices. This religious system focuses largely on the people's livelihood and rituals so as to maintain balance, order, and harmony between them and their environment, which consequently provide conditions for bountiful cultivation and harvests. They believe that there is a direct and continuing relationship between the events of daily life and a complex world of good and evil, supernatural beings, and unseen forces. Therefore they are convinced that proper ritual and ceremonial acts can mediate between humans and supernatural beings

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2 Indigenous peoples in this article refer mainly to the Kadazandusun specifically on the East Coast of Sabah, Labuk, Kinabatangan and Segama, Lahad Datu.

3 Richard Phelan, "The Form of Priesthood in the Kadazan (Dusun) System of Religion," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 115, no. 1 (January 1983): 55.

4 Owen Rutter, *The Pagans of North Borneo* (London: Hutchinson. 1929).

5 These spirits are called *penunggu* or watchmen who are responsible for protecting God's creation.

6 Phelan, "The Form of Priesthood": 55-73.

and forces to modify or even to control events that cause humans to fall ill, be uncertain, lose their luck, feel pain, or become fearful.<sup>7</sup>

Traditionally, religious rites are presided over by the *bobohizan*,<sup>8</sup> the female ritual specialists or the Shamans of Sabah.<sup>9</sup> They are the authorities on the sociospiritual and communal life of the people and the resource persons for each ethnic community in matters pertaining to religious and cultural knowledge and practices. Furthermore, they are intermediaries between humans and divinities, healers and performers of religious and cultural rites and ceremonies of passage rites such as birth, marriage, sickness, death, and life beyond this world. *Bobohizans* are the guardians of the life cycle of the staple crop (rice) as well as keepers and propagators of various multipurpose plants and food resources.<sup>10</sup>

Although the religious and cultural rituals or ceremonies vary from one ethnic group to another, the underlying basic belief is similar: they recognize one sole creator, the Supreme Being, *Kinoringan*, who has a wife called *Munsummundok* or *Suminundu*.<sup>11</sup> *Kinoringan* is revered as sovereign or *osondu*.<sup>12</sup> According to the indigenous peoples' traditional religious beliefs, *Kinoringan* and *Munsummundok* do possess human attributes but yet are distinct from human beings because they are both omnipotent and live somewhere in *kadawangan*.<sup>13</sup> As creators of the universe, *Kinoringan* and *Munsummundok* are responsible for their creation. The people fear them as gods of wrath who need to be appeased to avoid any form of vengeance, particularly when human beings perform certain acts that cause them

7 First-generation Christians whom I interviewed asserted that even before the coming of Christianity, they already acknowledged the existence of a supreme being who was in control of the universe and therefore to be revered.

8 *Bobohizans* or *bobolians/babalians* were predominantly female ritual specialists. F.G. Whelan, *Stories from Sabah History* (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1968).

9 In Kinabatangan, the *babalian's* main role is to perform healing ceremonies. This information is based on my personal communication with a former evangelist and son-in-law of a former *babalian* in Kinabatangan on May 13, 2012.

10 Based on my personal communication with a former *bobohizan* or *bobolian's* son and daughter.

11 Some of my respondents did not mention that *Kinoringan* has a wife, but they acknowledged *Kinoringan's* dominance over creation.

12 *Osondu* refers to one who is sovereign, majestic, powerful, and reverent.

13 The word *kadawangan* literally means "a huge open space above" or perhaps "galaxy," and it is perceived as "heaven."

rage.<sup>14</sup> This indicates that they are obliged to live a righteous life, pleasing to their gods and the spirits. They also recognize the spirits of the dead, the living, and demons. The rice spirit, *bambaazon*, is especially important to the indigenous peoples due to its significance to their livelihood.

Based on the census of 1951, the religion of the people in Borneo<sup>15</sup> was classified as Christian, Muslim, “other,” and “none,” of which “none” refers to the indigenous peoples’ belief or can “mean pagans,”<sup>16</sup> associated with animism, the worldview held by the indigenous peoples of Sabah. Those who have adopted Islam<sup>17</sup> or Christianity have often retained features of the traditional religion. Sometimes these still have deep spiritual significance, while other elements remain cultural markers of importance, even though divested of their religious meaning.

During the early stage of Christianity, most of the indigenous Christians practiced both Christianity and animistic traditional religion. They refused to forsake the gods and the spirits of their ancestors out of fear and continued practicing the rituals and ceremonies. Fear of the spirits is deeply rooted in the lives of the indigenous peoples, and as a result, they believe and practice different kinds of rituals in order to prevent taboos.<sup>18</sup>

In the Sabah context, animism refers to the beliefs of the indigenous peoples inherited from their ancestors, together with culture and practices.<sup>19</sup> They believe that personalized and supernatural beings dwell in ordinary

14 The Kadazandusun people traditionally believe in one god, the Creator, *Kinoringan*. The main character in their creation story is *Kinoringan*.

15 The religion census in 1921, 1931 and 1951 showed the following religious distribution: Christian 2.7%, 3.9%, 8.7%; Muslims 31.8%, 32.1%, 34.5%; other religions 13%, 15.3%, 16.5%; pagans 52.5%, 48.7%, 40.3%. See also M. H. Baker, *North Borneo: The First Ten Years 1946–1956* (Singapore: Malaya Publishing House, 1962), 16. See also J. Rose, ed., *Population Problems: Topical Issues* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 2000).

16 Baker, *North Borneo*, 16.

17 Islam came to Sabah in the fifteenth century, based on a *Jawi* manuscript in *Idahan* language dated 1408. It gives an account of an *Idahan* man, Abdullah, in Darvel Bay, who embraced Islam.

18 Fear of death haunts the indigenous people. Death is understood as the result of disobedience or lack of reverence to *Kinoringan*. Death can also be the attack of the malevolent spirits directly or indirectly through mediums if they fail to offer the sacrifices that are due.

19 Edward Burnett Tylor, *The Origins of Culture*, Harper Torchbooks 33, Primitive Culture 1 (New York: Harper, 1958/1871).

objects, including animate beings. These beings and objects govern their existence and are therefore to be revered and to be feared. They are convinced that human beings, animals, and plants possess souls. Likewise, they are convinced that spirits dwell in the mountains, oceans, rivers, lakes, and forests. In view of that, the world is considered as a community of living entities either in human or other forms. Based on this belief, the indigenous peoples attempt to relate respectfully with all entities, including people, rocks, plants, animals, birds, and ancestral spirits by being conscious of their actions, words, and thoughts and therefore should always be in harmony with their way of life in order not to offend any of the spirits that may instigate imbalance in the universe if one or more of the spirits is offended by their actions, words, or thoughts. The indigenous people are therefore gentle, calm, and respectful toward one another and toward other living beings or living things in order to keep the environment and universe in peace, harmony, and order—*ohusian*, respect for the environment and *oguhian*, respect for one another.

### Cosmology

The indigenous peoples, particularly the Kadazandusun have developed several legends and names to explain what they see and experience in the physical universe around them, including stories of the origin of the sun and moon or names for the stars. Each star is given a specific name such as *minsoguvang* or morning star, *mamalatik*, “calendar star” and *butitin*, linked to its function. In the past, every star had its own story or legend that provided a certain sign or guidance for the life of the community. Similarly, they acknowledge the importance of sun and moon in discerning the seasons for cultivation and some major events in the cycle of life of all the indigenous peoples.

In addition, they were also very much influenced by eclipses of the sun and moon. They were terrified by eclipses and performed specific rituals out of fear that the eclipses would bring adversity to the world. Wind or storms were also dreaded and were perceived to be associated with the rage of the malevolent spirits. For some, wind or storms were observed as signs or warnings of catastrophe due to “heat,” caused by misbehavior such as incest in the community.

The worldview of the indigenous peoples draws on their understanding of the natural forces. Furthermore, their concept of cosmology reveals that they respect the world around them and natural forces for guidance and self-understanding.

### Concept of Creation

The indigenous peoples of Sabah, believing that a supreme being created the universe, refer to their God as the Creator, ruler of the universe, or “the One above the sky.”<sup>20</sup> The concept of the universe varies from one ethnic group to another. For instance, the Rungus ethnic group believes that there are seven layers of the universe governed by different celestial spirits, whereas the Lotud ethnic group believes that there are seven spiritual layers above the physical world.

Despite the variations in their concept of creation, most indigenous communities believe that in the beginning a supreme being, *Kinoringan*, created the whole universe. He has a wife, *Suminundu*, and a daughter, *Hominudun*. In his preparation for creation, *Kinoringan* sacrificed his daughter by planting every part of her body to grow as rice for food for the Kadazandusun people. They are convinced that rice is sacred, and most of their religious rituals are associated with rice and the rice spirits. Rice spirits and rice rites are connected with creation rather than just with the spirit world, and they are good spirits that reflect the social order of a family. This indicates that rice spirits are intertwined with the life cycle of rice, not merely as their staple food but also as a sacred plant that embodies *bambaazon*, the living symbol of *Kinoringan*'s love and respect for his people. They acknowledge that there are seven to eight types of rice spirits such as the *ohinopot*, *ohimomod*, *sambilod*, *gontolobon*, *momiaud* and *momitudan*, *sompidut* and *kambang*.<sup>21</sup> For the Kadazandusun, rice therefore has both social and religious implications.

Kaamatan (harvest) is a ritual of thanksgiving to *Kinoringan*, the creator of the universe and his wife, *Suminundu*, for sacrificing their daughter, *Hominudun* so that rice could grow from her body to feed the Kadazandusun

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20 Most probably, it is natural for the indigenous peoples of Sabah who have embraced Christianity to address God as the Creator and God the ruler due to their concept of God.

21 “Rice Rites of Dusuns,” *Borneo Post*, May 26, 1996.

people. The life force of *Huminodun* is *bambaazon* (the rice spirit), whom the Kadazandusun wish to bring into their homes at *Kaamatan* to ensure their continuing bountiful harvest in the following year. *Kaamatan* is significant because it is not only the occasion to honor *bambaazon* and to thank *Kinoringan* for the bountiful harvest and his generosity in prolonging life on earth, but also an occasion for strengthening the unity of the community through mutual forgiveness and sharing. Furthermore, it is a sacred ceremony: the *bobohizan* (priestess) performs the sacred *monogit*<sup>22</sup> ceremony of thanksgiving for the previous rice harvest.

### The Spirit World

The indigenous peoples believe in an extensive spirit world that is important in the major events in the cycle of life as well as in the cycle of rice cultivation. Even though they believe in a supreme being who created everything, they also attribute spirits to all living things in nature. Belief in the spirit world is an important characteristic of the indigenous peoples' culture. They believe in both good and bad spirits and relate their activity to good or poor health and order and balance in life. Even though they believe in a supreme being who created everything, they also attribute spirits to all living things in nature. Furthermore, they believe that the spirit world comprises five main categories of nonhuman beings: the creator or *Kinoringan*,<sup>23</sup> malevolent spirits or *rogon*, souls of the dead or *tombiruvo*, helping spirits or *divato*, the rice spirit or *bambaazon*, and a race of small people or *binorit*.

*Kinoringan* is used to contrast with *rogon*<sup>24</sup> or *mainat*,<sup>25</sup> the devil—the good and the evil. The indigenous peoples believe that *Kinoringan* and other celestial beings inhabit the upper world, the supernatural world. According to their belief, these non-human beings or spirits play significant roles not only in the universe but also in the life of individuals and communities. The *rogon* or *mainat* are spirits of both the natural and the social worlds. They

22 The basic items used for any *monogit* ceremony are rice, rice grains, rice wine *tapai*, a knife, and chicken.

23 The creator or *Kinoringan*/*Kinorohingan*/*Kinoingan*, *Minamaal* generic term used by the indigenous peoples to address their Supreme Being or God.

24 This is the Kadazandusun Labuk term for the devil and evil spirits.

25 This is the Kadazandusun Segama term for the devil and evil spirits.

are the terrestrial spirits that inhabit the same world as human beings and are believed to dwell on mountains, in the valleys, rivers, lakes, rocks, caves, dark places,<sup>26</sup> on trees, especially red banyan trees called *Nunuk Ragang*,<sup>27</sup> in the forest, and almost everywhere. For this reason, these different spirits are either to be revered or to be feared in order to maintain a balance between good personal and community fortune or misfortune on the part of individuals and communities. In view of their strong belief in the spirit world, they live in fear because they are always fearful of the devils that are associated with darkness and the unknown. Nonetheless, they recognize that *Kinoringan* determines the order of the universe and any individual's destiny.

Before the coming of Islam and Christianity, the indigenous peoples were not too concerned about the ontological definitions of the word "God" as a transcendent being

because they were more involved in the living of the present, their daily lives. In view of their strong belief in the spirit world, Kadazandusun people live in fear because they are always fearful of the devils that are associated with darkness and the unknown. These devils are terribly dangerous and threatening to lives of human beings because they have families and are engaged in the same activities as human beings. Invading the dwelling places or territories of the *rogon* or *mainat* can cause disaster, misfortune, infertility, or illness. The afflictions of *rogon* or *mainat* can only be removed by a sacrifice or *sogit* in the form of animals such as pigs and chickens so as to reestablish a state of harmony and order in the environment and reconciliation between human beings and the *rogon* or *mainat*. Nonetheless, there are other malevolent spirits that are not in the category of *rogon* or *mainat* and can become visible by embodying living creatures in order to snatch them away. It is believed that there are animals or insects that are indwelt by malevolent spirits. In other cases, the spirit is considered to take on a temporary bodily form.

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26 Dark places or *towong* are associated with evil, diseases, and sorcery or basically associated with death and impurity.

27 The indigenous people of Sabah generally believe that the original settlement of the Kadazandusun is *Nunuk Ragang* (meaning red banyan tree), located at the intersection of the left and right branches of the Liwagu River east of Ranau and Tambunan in Sabah.



The indigenous peoples believe that a man or woman is made of a physical body or *kojuwan/kaiwan*, soul and seat of emotions or *ginavo/inawo*. When a person dies, the soul and seat of emotions leave the body and together go to Mt. Kinabalu, the place of departed souls. However, the Kadazandusun in Segama, Lahad Datu believe that the souls of the dead go to a place high above the sky or *Kadawangan/Kawarangan*, meaning the heavenly place. They perceive the Sacred Being in relation to space.

#### *Tatod*—Human Soul

The indigenous peoples believe that every individual has and is protected by their *tatod* or *atod* that symbolizes the life of a person. The existence of man or woman in the world means the existence of their *atod* or *tatod*.<sup>28</sup> A man or a woman is believed to have seven souls or *tatod/atod* such as eyes, ears, head, feet, hands, heart, and body. They are regarded as the real souls and are associated with sickness and dreams. Furthermore, the indigenous peoples believe that *tatod/atod* is related to the shadow of the individual. Due to this concept, they believe that an assault upon the shadow of a person may be fatal to its possessor. In addition, it is also a common belief that when a person is dead, his or her soul leaves the physical body. The indigenous peoples believe that the *tatod/atod* or soul of a living person can leave the body temporarily and if this happens, the priest or priestess has to summon the *tatod/atod* to return to the physical body of the person concerned in order to prevent the person falling sick. On the other hand, there are people with supernatural powers that can send away the soul—their own or others'—so as to cause illness. If the soul does not return, the body will perish because the existence of the *tatod/atod* is essential. Thus, the human soul for the indigenous peoples is essential for life. In their understanding, the well-being of the body is dependent on a healthy spirit.

#### Charms for Protection from Malevolent Spirits

Charms are used by the indigenous peoples in a number of ways to protect themselves from malevolent spirits or the evil intentions of others. There are different types of charms such as *panamparai* (a distinctive stone),

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28 The common belief is that the soul is invisible and only visible to the priests/priestesses or ritual healers who possess supernatural powers and are able to discern the spirits or souls moving about or endeavoring to escape from the body.

*sopinit* (beeswax), *komburongo* (dried roots of a special kind of plant used for healing), *jimat* or *arimo* (a piece of wood wrapped in a piece of cloth), *pongkolon* (a bone of tiny tree frog sewn in a piece of cloth and tied to the wrist), *tayub-ayub* (a kind of vine burned on the veranda, the strong smell of which will drive the malevolent spirits away), and *patung* or a kind of symbol (totem) made in the form of a human body and face and placed at the river landing.<sup>29</sup> Spiritual ritualists prepare the charms of protection, and individuals using these charms go through rituals and are required to observe specific taboos and sometimes abstinence from certain types of food.

Apart from charms as stated above, the indigenous peoples also practice several rituals for protection from evil spirits and evil intent in their daily lives. The common rituals for protection are for pregnant woman, a newborn, bride and groom, people going hunting and fishing or on a long journey, smoking beehives, taking oaths, rain-making or *magasab di tavan*, which literally means to smoke the sky and warfare.

### Ritual Specialists or Bobohizan

The ritual specialists are called *bobohizan*, *bolijan* or *babalian* and they are considered the most significant religious practitioners. Their training takes place at a very early age. They memorize specific types of songs, chants, or *rinait* from a senior *bobohizan* for years before they are acknowledged and accepted in the circle of ritual specialists. In the course of their training, they give payment called '*pikaras*' to the senior *bolijan*, who is their teacher. This may be in the form of money or chickens and other symbolic things. Once they have completed the course of the study, the final payment is in the form of a piece of special clothing so that the good spirits know that they have learnt all the chants. The good spirits are summoned in prayer to give "blessings" and to acknowledge the new *bolijan*. Then the newly qualified *bolijan* presents a sharp bush-knife to their teacher. The sharpness of the knife symbolises a 'sharp' memory for the new *bobohizan*. *Bobohizans* are prohibited from drinking alcohol such as the rice wine or

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29 Hope Hurlbut, "Traditional Beliefs of the Eastern (Labuk) Kadazan People," *Sabah Museum and Archives Journal* 1, no. 1 (1986): 129-131. This is also based on my own observations as an indigenous person and personal conversations with indigenous peoples in Kinabatangan, Labuk and Segama.

*tapai*, as this may cause them to forget the chants required for the healing rituals. It is important for the ritual specialists or *bobohizans* to use different combinations of sacrifices and chants for every healing ceremony. Music is believed to provide the means through which the physical and spiritual worlds meet. Thus, every healing ceremony is accompanied by the beating of gongs.

### Ritual Healers

Ritual healers play a very important role in the community life of indigenous peoples and there are various types of ritual healers. Some ritual healers rely on the help of the spirits in performing healing and others acquire special arts or skills used for healing. The type of healing ritual depends on the kinds and nature of sickness. There are different types of healing ceremonies such as *magandavai*, *timpadang*, *monumbui*, *mongorimpun do tatod*, *monguok* and *sulau*.<sup>30</sup>

During these healing ceremonies, the ritual healers use certain objects that have symbolic religious implications. Each healing ceremony has a distinct chant accompanied by gongs and rituals, performed by the ritual healer alone or with other ritual healers.

## TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS RITES AND EXPERIENCES OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The rites and ceremonies of the indigenous peoples of Sabah vary from place to place. In the past the ethnic communities resided in the rural areas and were isolated from one another. They therefore used oral tradition to pass on their religious beliefs and practices.

### *Sogit*—Sacrifice or Atonement

Sacrifice is a universal motif in the mythologies of many traditions and religions. It is universally understood as the offering to the deity as an outward manifestation of atonement of a member of the community or the whole community. Likewise, *sogit*, referring to sacrifice or atonement, is the core of the indigenous peoples' culture. *Sogit* is performed to make

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30 For further discussion on these various healing ceremonies, see Hurlbut, "Traditional Beliefs": 148-153.

retribution for an offense, crime, or sin committed by a person against another person. The objects of sacrifice are animals to appease a god or gods or for changing the course of nature. The indigenous peoples believe that the imbalance between the physical and spirit worlds are depicted in the concept of *alasu* or *ma'amut* (hot) and *osogit* or *asagit* (cold) in nature. Evil things are categorized as *alasu/ma'amut*, whereas good things are *osogit* or *asagit*. In order to restore the balance between *alasu/amut* and *osogit/asagit*, the ritual of *sogit* is performed.<sup>31</sup> It is a “cooling” compensation for the purpose of peace and reconciliation between individuals, families, ethnic groups, communities, as well as with the spirits. The offering is not perceived as an act of worship or adoration offered to the devil but rather to appease the devil's anger for human negligence or disobedience. It is worth noting that the desire for tolerance as well as peace and reconciliation has prevented tribal wars and ethnic conflict.

The offerings of sacrifices imply that the indigenous peoples view life and well-being of people in the community as interconnected with the spirit world and nature. Life is perceived to be very vulnerable to the spirits. To maintain peace and harmony not only with the spirits but also within the community, nature, or the environment, sacrifice or *sogit* is offered. This indicates that the *sogit* ritual is both a religious and social ceremony, which has spiritual and social implications for the lives of the community.

#### Dreams—Means of Communication with *Kinoringan*

Dreams are another representative motif in the belief of the indigenous peoples. They believe that *Kinoringan* communicates with the people in the community through dreams, normally related to good and bad events. In order to discern the interpretation of a dream, a *bobohizan* is called to perform ritual sacrifice using animal's blood to ensure the order and harmony of the cosmos and society. Dreams still influence the life of the indigenous peoples. They reflect the relationship between *Kinoringan* and

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31 There are three types of *sogit* ceremonies performed by the priests or priestess. First, rituals connected with cultivation since indigenous people have strong ties with the land. Second, communal *sogit* ceremonies, which are intended to pacify the whole village or community. Third, personal ceremonies for appeasing a single individual or household, such as sacrifice for a house, to heal a kind of sickness, to protect from bad dreams, bad omens, and bad luck.

the community, and the relationship of the community with *Kinorangan* and different types of spirits.

### Rites of Passage

Arnold Van Gennep<sup>32</sup> states that there is a succession of phases with similar ends and beginnings in an individual's life: birth, childhood, puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, motherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals. Consequently, rites are often associated with major changes in roles in the course of a lifetime, and they serve important functions in adjustment for both societies and individuals.

The indigenous peoples of Sabah recognize rites of passage by holding numerous traditional beliefs and practices such as the birth, naming, and dedication of a child, puberty, betrothal, marriage, death, and burial. The rites of passage are significant because each individual is believed created by *Kinorangan* and therefore obliged to show reverence by observing the religious rituals and prohibitions that have been practiced from generation to generation. One's life begins during conception in the mother's womb. The relationship between the fetus and the Creator begins from that moment. It is therefore important for the mother and father of the child to be sensitive to and respectful of the good spirits, who are viewed as the guardians of the child. The mother also has to be aware and observe all the taboos to protect the child from being harmed by the malevolent spirits.

## SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

### *Adat*—Customary Law

*Adat* is embedded in the culture of the indigenous peoples and is esteemed highly because it is an important aspect in the life of the society that holds and integrates each community.<sup>33</sup> *Adat* governs or controls the behavior of each ethnic group community. *Adat* becomes one of the cultural elements that play an integral role in their communities, the system

32 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1960, repr. 2004), 3.

33 *Adat* refers to a native custom or body of native customs to which lawful effect has not been given under any written law and shall be deemed to include tradition and culture of the natives.

of common understandings about meanings, values, rules, and norms. Traditionally, there were four major institutions of authority governing each village or ethnic group community: the village chief or *ketua kampung*, the village council, the priests and priestesses, and the descent community's chief or *Huguan Siou*. These *adat* bearers in the community mediate and advise members of the community based on the *adat* system. Consequently, their social life is in order and balance, and everyone is accountable to one another in order to maintain peace, harmony, and unity.

### *Magitabang*—Sense of Community

The indigenous peoples in Sabah practice communal life. *Magitabang* or *mutabang*, meaning “to help one another,” was a strong tradition among them. *Magitabang* is performed when a neighbor is starting a new field, harvesting, building a new house or boat, during wedding ceremonies, and funerals. Each family in the community not only contributes their skills, energy, and time to help but also contributes food and other things so as to lighten the burden of the host family.<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the religious and cultural background of the indigenous peoples of Sabah, it is apparent that their religious beliefs and culture are intertwined and deeply integrated with one another. They believe in a supreme being and creator of the whole universe whom they call *Kinoringan*. Nonetheless, they also acknowledge *Suminundu* as *Kinoringan*'s wife and cocreator, indicating that they view God in the context of a community. They also believe in the existence of other good spirits whose main tasks are to help and protect human beings from the attacks of malevolent spirits. For this reason, individually but more corporately, the community constantly relates to *Kinoringan* and other spirits in order to sustain the order of the spiritual world, which also influences their social world. Apparently, their concept, purpose, and ways of “worship” are different from a Christian understanding and more concerned with appeasement and reconciliation, although these themes are also found in

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34 Sharing food is a very significant practice among indigenous peoples in Sabah. It is a symbol of accepting one another. Offering food such as a kind of dish or dessert to a new neighbor is a sign of acceptance and the beginning of a friendship.

Christianity (cf. the community of the Trinity and the sacrifice of Jesus for sin and reconciliation). Although not within the scope of this article, there is much scope for further theological reflection of these themes in light of the beliefs and practices of the indigenous peoples.

To maintain order, balance, and harmony within the physical and spiritual realms and to seek protection from the deities, the people recognize the significant roles and functions of the spiritual ritualists and spiritual healers, trained and anointed (*sinandatan*) women and men. Thus, whenever they are dealing with difficult issues such as sickness, epidemics, or catastrophes, or during significant stages of life or critical events related to cultivation, the spiritual ritualists, spiritual healers, and experts of the *adat* system are consulted.

In addition, the Kadazandusuns also emphasize the importance of sacrifice or *sogit* for the purpose of appeasement and justification. Consequently, they preserve and practice various rituals and ceremonies in order to be in harmony with the spirit beings as well as with one another because it is through the rituals and ceremonies that they can gather corporately to show reverence and offer thanksgiving to *Kinoringan* and other spirits. Simultaneously, their relationship with one another is nurtured. They not only identify *Kinoringan* as the creator but also address him as *osondu* or *asundu*, a way of acknowledging that he is holy, righteous, majestic, and awesome and therefore not to be approached casually nor superficially.

In examining their religious life, it is apparent that their ritual ceremonies are conducted corporately, reflecting their communal way of living. This concern and accountability for one another is also evidenced through the practice of *magitabang* and the observance of the *adat* system so as not to violate the order and harmony of the community. As a matter of fact, every member and family unit within the community is expected to be honest with one another in order to avoid the occurrence of *alasu*, which is understood to affect the whole community and not just the offenders. The social structure, which is closely intertwined with the *adat* system, is highly valued because of its role in preserving the reputation of every family for the sake of the whole community. For this reason, moral principles are highly esteemed in the social life of the Kadazandusun so as to preserve the integrity and self-esteem of the community.

In summary, it is apparent that life for the Kadzandusun is about cultivating relationship with the spiritual powers and horizontal relationship with fellow human beings. They have a strong sense of identity as both individuals and particularly as a community.

**About author**

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