

A Functionalist Perspective on the *Mikorot* Ritual Among Indigenous Communities (Dusun) in Sabah, Malaysia: An Analysis of its Practices and Significance for Ethnic Harmony

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Abstract

The population of Sabah, characterized by high ethnic and religious diversity, possesses a rich and distinctive cultural heritage. Cultural practices observed within these communities undoubtedly serve important social functions and roles and continue to be preserved to the present day. *Mikorot* is one such indigenous practice in Sabah, carrying significant functions and implications for interethnic and interreligious relations. *Mikorot*, or the ritual of blood-drinking, has long been practiced among the indigenous ethnic groups of Sabah and the social bonds established through this ritual continue to be maintained today. This study aims to explain the practice of the *mikorot* ritual among indigenous communities in Sabah and to examine its role in promoting ethnic harmony. The research adopts a qualitative approach, employing interviews as the primary data collection method and using snowball sampling to identify eligible respondents. The findings indicate that the *mikorot* ritual is intended to establish kinship ties without marital bonds. These kinship relationships are not limited to male-male or female-female pairings; they may also occur between individuals of different genders and ethnicities, as well as between individuals of different religions. The practice of *mikorot* has contributed positively to interethnic and interreligious relations, as well as to stability in Sabah society.

Keywords: Blood-drinking Ritual, Ethnic Harmony, Ethnic Tolerance, *Mikorot*.

Introduction

The Dusun community, part of the Kadazandusun group in Sabah, is an indigenous ethnic group rich in cultural traditions still observed today. The Dusun ethnic group is widely dispersed throughout Sabah but is primarily concentrated in Telupid, Ranau, Kota Belud, Kudat, Kota Kinabalu, Papar, Keningau, Tambunan, Penampang, Beaufort, Tuaran, Kiulu and Tamparuli. The Dusun ethnic groups are categorized into sub-ethnicities based on locality or dialect. There are other sub-ethnic Dusun groups, including Liwan, Bundu, Tatana, Kimaragang, Tindal, Lotud, Tobilung and many more. This paper describes one of the values of a Dusun ritual still practiced today, known as *mikorot*. Previous studies have shown that blood-drinking rituals such as *mikorot* are not exclusively practiced by the Dusun community but are also observed in other societies across different countries. The Ambonese community in Indonesia practices a similar ritual known as *pela*. *Pela*, involving a blood-drinking ritual, affects future

family relationships. Communities that practice *pela* establish strong kinship bonds that have lasting implications for family ties and marriage arrangements, particularly in *Pela Gandong*, where members are prohibited from marrying one another (1, 2). In another study conducted in Indonesia, the role of *pela* and *gandong*, as traditional institutions of the indigenous Maluku community, in fostering social integration in Ambon, particularly following the large-scale religious conflicts in the region was examined; the main claim was that although *pela* and *gandong* served as mechanisms for peacebuilding and reconciliation during the conflict, their effectiveness was largely confined to indigenous communities bound by customary oaths (3). Meanwhile, a study demonstrated that *pela* serves as an important social mechanism in fostering integration and solidarity between Muslim and Christian communities in Maluku (4). The term "brotherhood" is used for another ritual of

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drinking blood. Chinese society in Jordan studies (5) and implements blood-drinking rituals, which involve feasts or crowds. The feast serves wine and includes an oath-taking ceremony, usually held in a temple. The blood of each participant is then mixed with an alcoholic beverage, usually wine and consumed by everyone involved in the oath-taking ceremony. The oath signifies that the participants have become blood brothers. The deep respect accorded to this ritual has even led some individuals to change their surnames and adopt a shared family name.

Besides Asia, blood drinking rituals have also been practiced in Europe and America. It is reported that the Scythians took oaths by mixing their own blood, obtained from small self-inflicted wounds, into wine (6). They also dipped weapons such as swords, arrows, battle axes and javelins into the mixture, pronounced curses on anyone who would break the oath and finally drank the wine-blood mixture together with the members of their group. White reinterpreted three earlier ethnographic studies conducted in East Africa, namely Pritchard's 1937 study of the Azande, Roscoe's 1967 study of the Baganda and Beidelman's 1962 study of the Kaguru. He argued that the practice of blood brotherhood or blood oath rituals should not be understood as a single institution with a uniform meaning (7). Rather, it functions as a social mechanism for constructing kinship bonds among men based on socially idealized forms of relationships. Similarly, Oschema examined blood-brotherhood rituals in medieval Europe and found that modern writers often portrayed such practices as characteristic of so-called "primitive" societies. However, these portrayals also served as symbolic strategies to distinguish and exclude foreign or non-Christian cultures (8).

In addition, a historical study of blood oath traditions among Hungarian tribes described how leaders and tribal chiefs would each draw blood and mix it into a single cup as a symbol of sworn loyalty (9). Meanwhile, Aird demonstrates that, since prehistoric times, blood has been used in a wide range of rituals, including sacrifice, offerings, bloodletting and taboo practices, functioning within magical, religious, social and symbolic structures. Across diverse cultures, blood serves as a symbol of social bonds, commitment and identity, including in blood bond rituals that create ties

between individuals who are not biologically related (10).

The ritual practices discussed above, such as *pela*, brotherhood rites and blood oath ceremonies, demonstrate that blood-based rituals have been widely practiced across different cultural and historical contexts. Similarly, among the Dusun ethnic group in Sabah, this ritual is known as *mikorot* and continues to be observed today, albeit on a diminishing scale. This paper seeks to examine the ritual practices of *mikorot*, its procedures and its social significance within the Dusun community in Sabah, Malaysia.

Research on the *mikorot* ritual in Malaysian society is a novel undertaking, as limited studies have examined it. Furthermore, given that the *mikorot* ritual is practiced by the indigenous people of Sabah, this study is crucial to elucidating the ritual's performance and its broader implications for Sabahan society. This research advances knowledge and the existing body of literature; it offers valuable insights to relevant agencies for implementing related programs and serves as an important contribution to the documentation of indigenous culture in Sabah.

Accordingly, the research questions are as follows:

- (a) What is the *mikorot* ritual?
- (b) How is the *mikorot* ritual conducted?
- (c) What are the implications of the *mikorot* ritual for society?

Based in the research question, the research objectives of this current study are to:

- (a) explain the concept and practice of the *mikorot* ritual;
- (b) identify the requirements and methods of executing the *mikorot* ritual;
- (c) describe the implications of the *mikorot* ritual for society.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach through interviews with informants, which is considered the appropriate way to obtain detailed information about *mikorot* rituals. There is a constraint on direct observation of the *mikorot* ceremony because it was not observed in this study. *Mikorot* is rarely observed in the modern Dusun communities. Face-to-face interviews and phone calls were used to interview informants. The interview results were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis

was employed to examine themes relevant to the research objectives.

Research Samples

Five informants were selected for this study using snowball sampling. As *mikorot* has become unpopular among the present-day Dusun community, the snowball sampling method was used because potential informants are limited and difficult to identify. Snowball sampling is a method in which respondents identify additional respondents during the research process. This method is used when respondents are limited and difficult to identify. It is called a snowball because theoretically grows progressively as additional respondents are identified. There are two stages in obtaining snowball samples. First, to identify one or two potential subjects in a population. Second, to get the selected subject to identify another subject (11). In this research, the first two informants were a Dusun married couple from Kg. Tenghilan, where the research is done. Tenghilan is selected as the research area because a few people were identified as participants in *mikorot* and blood-drinking rituals intended to create family relationships or ties. Tenghilan is also chosen because the population is familiar with

the term *mikorot*, the approximate geographical coordinates of the research site are 6.25832° N, 116.31767° E. especially among older people. Although the first two informants have never participated in *mikorot*, they are knowledgeable in this ritual. The first two informants led the researcher to Francis Lamun, who has more knowledge in this matter. Francis Lamun then brought the researcher to another informant, James Joseph.

Francis Lamun resides in Kg. Tenghilan, while James Joseph lives in Tamparuli. Both originated from Tenghilan. They are familiar and knowledgeable in *mikorot* ritual. Francis Lamun is a 67-year-old retired teacher who participated in a blood-drinking ritual, but not in the context of *mikorot*. Francis Lamun and his friend's blood-drinking ritual was meant to strengthen their ties as students of the same *silat* master, not as blood brothers, which is the concept of *mikorot*. *Silat* is a traditional martial art that is popular in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia. James Joseph is a 57-year-old Headmaster for SK Pekan Tamparuli. He had participated in *mikorot* in the 80s. The fifth informant is Jupili Panchai, an ex-colleague from the research group who had also participated in the *mikorot* ritual.

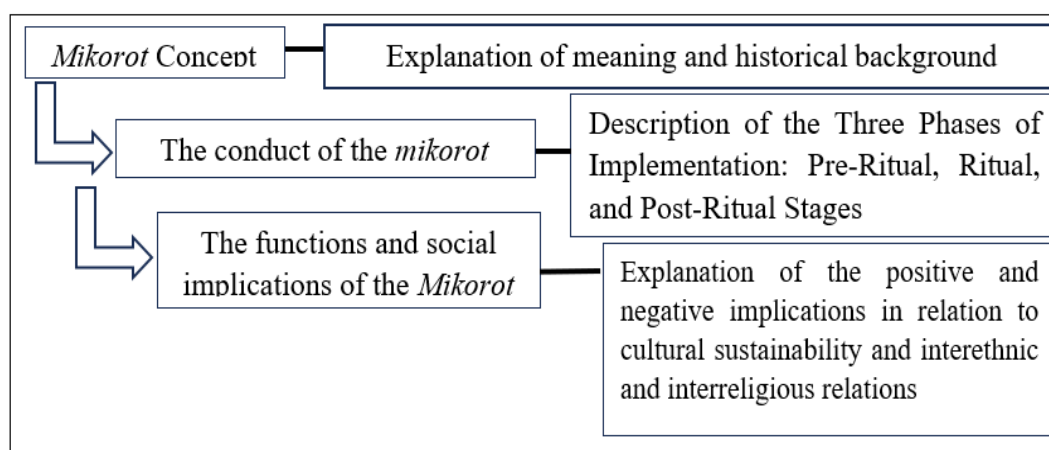


Figure 1: Research Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the study's framework, which outlines three key components: first, the concept of *mikorot*, specifically its cultural significance among the communities in Sabah; second, the chronological process of the *mikorot* ritual and the requisite conditions; and finally, the functions of the *mikorot* ritual and its impact on society, particularly regarding cultural preservation and inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Sabah.

Results

The Concept, Meaning and Origin of *Mikorot*

Mikorot is a very important institution for some local cultures in Sabah. It can be an important indicator, especially for understanding locals' perceptions of establishing relationships with

individuals from different ethnic groups without the bond of marriage.

The brotherhood ceremonies found in many other ethnic groups in Sabah are called by different names. Some do it by sacrificing chickens, goats, buffalo, or any farm animals. Individuals who took the brotherhood oaths bring offerings or gifts, including gongs and other items. In the Iranun society, this is called *mingkeret*, while the Dusun Tindal, if not mistaken, called it drinking *daraha*.

Marriage can represent a significant form of social acceptance and the formation of family ties. In Sabah, interfaith and interethnic marriages are established practices that reflect social acceptance, cultural, adaptation and harmonious relationships among diverse communities (12-14). Marriages produce offspring who form a family for the survival of future generations, also known as blood ties (descendants). Although we accept marriage as the highest form of acceptance between two individuals of different genders, there is acceptance of the same gender marriages in some countries in Europe. The marriage law in Malaysian society only accepts marriages between people of different genders. This is, of course, closely related to the moral values and religious values of the Malaysian society. Interestingly, the *mikorot* practice described in this paper is practiced not only by two individuals of different genders but also by individuals of the same gender. *Mikorot* is seen as an attempt to establish a legitimate family relationship between two or more individuals through cultural rites without biological aspects. In the context of ethnic relations, it is the highest level of acceptance beyond ethnic and hereditary boundaries and an indicator of high ethnic tolerance. Meanwhile, toleration is a reliable political solution to prevent conflicts that may threaten social security, especially when accompanied by social tolerance, that is, mutual acceptance and respect among individuals. The ability to work and live alongside others of different ethnic backgrounds is one definition of ethnic tolerance (15). Ethnic tolerance can be measured by an individual's level of acceptance of others across various types of relationships. Relationships can be measured based on levels of intimacy, using seven levels to describe the social distance between individuals or within society (16). The Bogardus social distance scale has seven levels that covers acceptance from the lowest level which is

level (17) scale 7: rejection of their presence the country; scale 6: acceptance as foreign visitors; scale 5: acceptance as residents of the country; scale 4: acceptance as colleagues; scale 3: acceptance as neighbours; scale 2: acceptance as friends and authority; and scale 1: acceptance as family or through marriage. Therefore, in the context of Bogardus's social distance, the practice of *mikorot* indicates that the level of ethnic tolerance in the Dusun community is high, as it is at level one, where the individual is accepted as a family member. *Mikorot* is derived from the Dusun root *korot*. Here are the definitions provided by a few respondents regarding the meaning and concept of *mikorot*.

Mikorot comes from the word *korot*, which means cut. *Mikorot* means to cut a finger for the purpose of drawing blood and the blood that drips will be mixed with coconut water and then drunk. (Munsing, personal interview, 19 Aug 2016).

Korot means close and *mikorot* means to be closer. *Mikorot* is a ritual that establishes a familial relationship between individuals regarded as siblings. *Mikorot* is carried out between individuals who have no blood or family relation. *Mikorot* can be performed between individuals of different ethnic groups or religions. The purpose of *mikorot* is to strengthen ties (Joseph, personal interview, 25 Nov 2016).

Mikorot means drinking blood together. This happens because in the olden days, people did not stay fixed, moving from one area to another. Staying together in one place, far from families and forming understanding and strong friendships and the feeling that this person is good and that I can make them family. *Korot* means drawing blood or cutting or poke with a needle to draw blood (Lamun, personal interview, 12 Nov 2016).

In general, Lamun personal interview, 12 Nov 2016, described *korot* as the act of drawing blood. The practice of *mikorot* emerged partly because Dusun communities in those days were highly mobile, frequently migrating from one area to another. Such migrations separate individuals from their extended families and kinship networks. As a result of these migrations, people made new acquaintances and engaged in daily interactions while living in the same settlements or sharing the same environment. Over time, these regular interactions fostered close relationships and deep friendships. As friendship strengthened, indivi-

duals felt the need to formalize their relationships into familial bonds. Beyond the institution of marriage, the *mikorot* ceremony served as an alternative means of establishing kinship ties. In this way, the practice of *mikorot* served as a mechanism for creating family-like bonds within the Dusun communities. There are also views suggesting that *mikorot* originated from the relationship between two close friends who were not biologically related and had no prior familial ties. Their friendship was described as so strong and inseparable that a ritual was created to formalize and seal their bond. Through the act of drinking a mixture of their blood, the ritual symbolically united them and affirmed their commitment to one another (Johnny, personal interview, 19 Aug 2016; Munsing, personal interview, 19 Aug 2016).

As a result of the interviews above, it can be understood that *mikorot* is an act performed by two or more individuals with no blood or family ties. They have a close relationship and they performed a *mikorot* ritual to strengthen their ties, signifying that they now live as one family and this is carried on to future generations. The *mikorot* ritual symbolizes the union of the individuals involved as if they were siblings. Thus, there should be no intermarriage between the children of *mikorot* siblings for three generations (Munsing, personal interview, 19 Aug 2016). *Sogit* will be imposed on couples who violate *mikorot* rules (Lamun, personal interview, 12 Nov 2016). The *sogit* imposed is the same as the *sogit* law imposed on marriages among cousins in the Dusun community. Specifically, the relationships among individuals involved in the *mikorot* oath are treated as family relationships, in which intermarriage is forbidden. This relationship is, in fact, considered that of siblings from the same parents and this continues into the next generation. In the Dusun community context, children of *mikorot* siblings are considered cousins.

Implementation of *Mikorot*: Rituals and Customs

The process of *mikorot* ritual or custom will be explained in three stages. The first stage is the pre-*mikorot* stage where preparations are made. The second stage is the *mikorot* stage and the third stage is the code of conduct after the customary rite.

Implementation of *Mikorot*: Stage One, Requirements and Preparations Before *Mikorot*

The people involved in the *mikorot* ritual must agree and meet the conditions set before the ceremony is performed. Below are the conditions and preparations as explained in Joseph's personal interview on 25 Nov 2016, when he did *mikorot* with his oath brother.

- (a) Agreement between parties to be involved in *mikorot*. Anyone can *mikorot* but must reach the age of maturity. Children are forbidden to *mikorot*. The number of participants should be at least 2 people or a group.
- (b) Agreement of family members. The families of the *mikorot* participants should be informed of the intention to *mikorot*.
- (c) The Head of the village needs to be informed. The Head of the village needs to be informed, as the Head is also the head of customs in most communities and the one responsible for solemnizing the *mikorot* ritual.
- (d) An invitation should be extended to the villagers once the venue and time of the *mikorot* have been decided. It is customary for villagers to attend the ceremony once an invitation is extended orally from one home to another.

The requirements and preparation on the day of *mikorot* are as follows:

- (a) Preparation of items
 - (i) A knife or needle
 - (ii) A young coconut if coconut water is used, or a glass if boiled water is used
- (b) Letter of Oath (Prepared by the Head of the village)
- (c) Sacrificial animal and a feast

The items used by Joseph, his partner for the *mikorot* were a needle and a glass of boiled water. The use of a glass of water suggests that the modern execution of their *mikorot* ceremony has experienced a slight change. In the past, the Dusun were strict about using the coconut as the blood-mixing vessel for *mikorot* participants. Normally in *mikorot*, the most important item is a coconut. Why is coconut used? Coconut is chosen for *mikorot* because coconut water is considered pure and natural, as it is stored inside the coconut and is protected (Munsing, personal interview, 19 Aug 2016).

That opinion regards the purity of the coconut based on the coconut water. This is an important factor in choosing the coconut, as it is easily available. However, in addition to coconut water, the society also used boiled water poured into a glass for the *mikorot* ritual (Joseph, personal interview, 25 Nov 2016). In terms of the choice of either a knife or a needle to draw blood, there is no clear indication of any cultural value. According to Joseph (personal interview, 25 Nov 2016), another requirement for a *mikorot* ritual is a letter of oath. The letter is prepared by the village head. The head needs to be informed in advance so the letter can be prepared before the ritual. The letter is important as evidence of the *mikorot* oath that the individuals had taken. Joseph, personal interview, 2016, letter of oath was written in Dusun. Animal sacrifice is mandatory in the *mikorot* ritual (Joseph, personal interview, 25 Nov 2016). The meat of the sacrificial animal is then served to guests before and after the *mikorot* ritual. Food is prepared collectively by the local community through the traditional practice of *gotong-royong* a day before the *mikorot* ritual. *Mikorot* preparation is carried out on a large scale because it involves the whole village. The preparation is similar to the preparation of a Dusun wedding ceremony.

Implementation of Mikorot: Stage Two, The Mikorot Ritual Implementation

This information is based on the personal interview with Joseph (25 Nov 2016) about his experience in the 1980s. The ritual needs to be held in an open space where guests or villagers can see and witness it. The ceremony commences only after the *mikorot* oath-takers, the designated village head and the parents of those involved and immediate family members have arrived and are ready. The village head will start with a speech informing every one of the *mikorot*'s intention. The village head will confirm the decision with the *mikorot* participants, the participants' parents and the guests to see if there are any objections before the ritual is performed. The host will usually be the one who prepares the equipment for *mikorot*. The *mikorot* individuals must use the same equipment to perform *mikorot*. For example, the *mikorot* partners must use the same needle to pierce themselves and draw blood. The piercing is not necessarily done on their fingers. Other parts of the body can be pierced to obtain blood.

The village head will start by using a needle or a knife to pierce (a small cut to draw blood) the fingers of the *mikorot* participants. A few drops of the blood will be let to drip into the coconut water or the glass of boiled water. The mixture is then stirred well. The village head will then ask the *mikorot* partners to drink the blood mixture. There is no issue with who should drink the mixture first, as it can be decided by the *mikorot* participants. Once the mixture has been drunk, the village head will announce that the participants are now officially bound by *mikorot*. The *mikorot* oath letter will be signed by the participants, the village head and three other witnesses. The witnesses selected are usually the parents of the *mikorot* partners and the friends of each *mikorot* partner. A copy of the letter of oath will be kept by each *mikorot* partner. Joseph, in a personal interview on 25 Nov 2016, stated that he and his *mikorot* partner had signed the letter of oath, which was written in Dusun. In the context of customs and culture, the letter of oath demonstrates that *mikorot* is important and highly regarded within the family system of the Dusun communities. The letter serves not only as important evidence of the *mikorot* siblings but also as a reference for future generations. It can serve as a reference for the Mikorot siblings' descendants. The letter can be used as a reference by the village head should there be marriages and other customary violations within the families of the *mikorot* siblings. Although the letter of oath is significant in the *mikorot* ritual, in the past, some *mikorot* siblings were more comfortable declaring the oath orally. This could be due to past illiteracy. According to Lamun, personal interview, 12 Nov 2016, in the past *mikorot* was not documented but was sealed with a heart-to-heart *mikorot* pact between the partners. Therefore, the village head is important not only as the mediator who performs the *mikorot* but also as the person who solemnizes the mikorot ceremony or serves as a witness.

The *mikorot* process is performed between two individuals who have agreed to perform the ritual and must have witnesses. The witnesses must be family members from both sides of the family and the village head must be present during the ritual. If the village head is unable to attend, then it is not encouraged to perform *mikorot* (Johnny, personal interview, 19 Aug 2016).

Implementation of *Mikorot*: Stage Three, Practices After *Mikorot*

Once the *mikorot* ritual is completed, the individual involved will receive a new title or name, which they will use among themselves. The community will now introduce them as 'the *korot* of' followed by the name of the *korot* brothers (Joseph, personal interview, 25 Nov 2016). Example; Bernadette, the *korot* of Budi. *Korot* is used by the *korot* brothers when introducing their *korot*. The usual term is 'my *korot*' (Joseph, personal interview, 25 Nov 2016). Example of using 'my *korot*': This is Bernadette. Bernadette is my *korot*.

It is also customary that, before returning to their respective homes, the *mikorot* brothers spend the night together in the house where the ceremony is performed. However, this practice is optional for the *mikorot* brothers' family members. Only the *mikorot* brothers are bound to this practice. This is to show that they are now officially treated as one family (Joseph, personal interview, 25 Nov 2016). The *mikorot* ritual marks the family ties between families in every sense of the term; hence, marriages are forbidden between *mikorot* partners and their children. Family members of the *mikorot* partners who violate this rule will face a fine or a *sogit* according to the customary law in a Dusun family. Regarding property inheritance, Lamun (personal interview, 12 Nov 2016) stated that the Dusun does not practice dividing property among *mikorot* families. Property will only be inherited by family members who are the biological children, biological siblings, or related through marriage (Lamun, personal interview, 12 Nov 2016).

The Implication and Dilemma of *Mikorot* in The Dusun Community

On a positive note, *mikorot* introduces variety within the family institution without involving nuptial vows. According to Joseph (personal interview, 2016), the family will expand because of *mikorot*. *Mikorot* gives you the advantages of having families in other areas or villages. The concept of *korot* gives you the comfort of being at home away from home. However, *mikorot* does post some problems. *Mikorot* is unbreakable. *Mikorot* partners will be considered as biological siblings where blood is thicker than water (Joseph, personal interview, 25 Nov 2016).

One of the informants, Panchai (personal interview, 2 Nov 2017), comes from Kota Belud. His grandfather had participated in *mikorot* with

someone from a different ethnic and cultural background. His grandfather was a Dusun and a pagan, whilst his *korot* was a Bajau and a Muslim. After twenty years of separation between his grandfather and his *korot*'s offspring, the closeness could still be felt. In fact, Jupili as the grandson, mentioned that the ties between him and his grandfather's *korot* were as close as being biologically related rather than through *mikorot* (Panchai, personal interview, 2017).

Whereas in *mikorot*, family ties can be made between people of the same or different genders. *Mikorot* can be practiced by anyone, male and male, male and female, or female and female. However, there is an opinion that *mikorot* between a male and a female is not encouraged as it can give a different implication. Nevertheless, should *mikorot* be agreed between a male and a female, it is still accepted by the community. *Mikorot* is now disappearing and has somewhat lost its popularity, especially among the younger generations. The younger generation of the Dusun community has very little information about this ritual; in fact, some do not even know that *mikorot* exists. One of the reasons *mikorot* is disappearing is the rule that family members of the *mikorot* were not allowed to marry. This is a taboo and the marriage of *mikorot* couples brings shame to the family. The case of *mikorot* partners being married had happened in the research area. A couple married each other after *mikorot*. It has a negative impact on the custom. The couple had to break or revoke the *korot*. The partners who wish to revoke their *korot* need to offer a sacrificial animal, following the same process as when they perform the *mikorot*. If a buffalo was used for the *mikorot* ceremony, a buffalo is also needed to revoke the *korot* (Lamun, personal interview, 12 Nov 2016). There was also a case in which the children of the *korot* partners were fined a pig for violating the law by getting married. They were said to be married as they did not know the family of their father's *korot*. Although the marriage continued, the couple had to offer a sacrificial animal as *sogit* for violating custom (Lamun, personal interview, 12 Nov 2016).

Discussion

This study demonstrates that *mikorot* is not merely a traditional ritual within the Dusun community but also an important social mechanism for

constructing interethnic relations and kinship ties independent of biological or marital bonds. Based on the findings, *mikorot* enables individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to establish and be recognized as a family without formal marriage. This phenomenon reflects a high level of tolerance and acceptance, as formal kinship ties are constructed despite religious differences (12). The relationships formed through the *mikorot* ritual are regarded as equivalent to familial ties and are therefore subject to customary rules and obligations, particularly concerning marriage among *korot* families. Such recognition of kinship illustrates a significant degree of tolerance in relations between culturally and religiously diverse groups (18). *Mikorot* also embodies complex and symbolic ritual elements, including mixing blood with coconut water or other beverages and signing a sworn agreement as evidence of the bond's formalization (Joseph, personal interview 2021). This symbolism reinforces the idea that blood is not merely a biological substance but also a social and cultural medium that unites individuals beyond actual kinship ties, consistent with Aird's findings on the role of blood in ritual and social relations across cultures (10). From a functionalist perspective, *mikorot* plays a crucial role in strengthening solidarity, fostering trust and maintaining social norms, in line with White's study of blood-brotherhood in East Africa and Oschema's analysis of blood-brotherhood rituals in Europe (7, 8). The implementation of *mikorot* has provided an alternative means of establishing family relationships without marriage and has generated positive cross-ethnic and interreligious relationships, reflecting a high degree of tolerance within society. However, dilemmas arise particularly in the context of marriage among subsequent generations. In the context of *mikorot* relationships, *korot* partners are subject to *sogit* under customary law, as are families formed through marriage. For example, fines may be imposed on the children of *korot* partners who marry, or on marriages between individuals considered *korot* cousins. Furthermore, if *korot* partners of different genders choose to marry one another, they must formally dissolve their *mikorot* agreement and perform a sacrificial ritual comparable to that conducted at the time the original *mikorot* covenant was established. Overall,

this study emphasizes that *mikorot* is not only a unique cultural practice within the Dusun community but also an important framework for understanding the dynamics of social integration, interethnic relations and cultural values that transcend biological and marital boundaries. The practical implications of this research suggest that preserving rituals such as *mikorot* can serve as a form of cultural education that promotes tolerance, solidarity and social recognition in a multiethnic society such as Sabah.

Mikorot is a unique ritual that carries significant customary value within the Dusun community and other indigenous communities in Sabah. It has long been practiced by the Dusun and several other ethnic groups in the state. This longstanding tradition reflects the high level of tolerance and openness among the Dusun and other native communities of Sabah, fostering relationships that transcend ethnic and religious boundaries. Local media frequently portray Sabah as an example of a harmonious "Malaysia" society despite its multiethnic and multireligious composition. The foundations of this harmony are likely shaped by multiple factors that must be understood within a broader sociocultural context. Evidently, the practice of *mikorot* is one of the factors that foster a high level of tolerance within Sabahan communities. The findings of this study indicate that the high level of acceptance of ethnic and religious difference partners in *mikorot* demonstrates that communities in Sabah possess a high level of tolerance, not only within the Dusun community but also among other communities that are willing to participate in the ritual *mikorot*. These findings are also consistent with previous studies, which have shown that communities in Sabah generally demonstrate tolerance and maintain harmonious relationships despite differences in ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Such social tolerance and harmonious relationships contribute to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence among the diverse communities in Sabah (19–22). This study contributes to understanding of functionalist theory by demonstrating how *mikorot* functions as a cultural and social institution within the Dusun community. From a functionalist perspective, cultural practices can contribute to the maintenance of social relationship, social cohesion and order within a community. In the context of

Sabah, previous research has highlighted the importance of tolerance and ethnic harmony in sustaining relationship among communities quoth diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (12, 14, 23, 24). Meanwhile, the structural-functional perspective emphasizes that social activities and interactions contribute to the continuity of social structure, with the function of social activities understood in terms of their contributes to maintaining structural continuity (25). In the context of this study, *mikorot* can be understood as a social institution that establishes kinship ties, regulates relationships through customary obligations and contributes to the maintenance of social order within the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *mikorot*, the blood-drinking ritual, can be understood as a cultural institution that establishes and preserves kinship relations among individuals. More specifically, *mikorot* functions as a mechanism of social control, because individuals who violate the oath or commitments of *mikorot* are perceived as disrupting social balance and the kinship ties established through the ceremony. From a functionalist perspective, *mikorot* also serves an integrative function by uniting individuals from diverse backgrounds into a stable, structured social network. Therefore, the main claim of this study is that *mikorot* is not merely a cultural tradition but a cultural instrument that sustains harmony, unity and enduring kinship relationships within society. This study also contributes to the advancement of knowledge and to the existing literature on the cultures of communities in Sabah and Malaysia more broadly. Furthermore, it offers insights into the relationships among Sabah's diverse ethnic and religious groups; the government can use these findings to formulate and plan appropriate programs that foster interethnic and interreligious harmony. However, given that the scope of this study was limited to respondents from the Dusun community, future research could be expanded to examine the *mikorot* ritual from the perspectives of other ethnic groups. This study of the *mikorot* ritual makes a unique contribution to understanding community culture and the dynamics of intergroup relations within society.

Abbreviations

None.

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Author Contributions

Budi Anto Mohd Tamring: Conceptualization, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Validation, Writing - Origanal Draft, Final Version of the Manuscript, Bernadette Tobi: Translation, Writing, Data Analysis, Brenda Olivera Well Joemakker: Writing, Validation, Revision Of Manuscript, Review of Final Manuscript, Alice Alim: Conceptualization, Data Analysis, Validation, Review of Final Manuscript, Florina Jumil: Conceptualization, Data Analysis, Validation, Review of Final Manuscript, Henry Bating: Conceptualization, Data Analysis, Validation, Review of Final Manuscript, Mohamad Ali Abdullah: Conceptualization, Data Analysis, Validation, Review of Final Manuscript, Haryantie Gopoit: Conceptualization, Data Analysis, Validation, Review of Final Manuscript, Keiko Ota Masayoshi: Conceptualization, Data Analysis, Validation, Review of Final Manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors used AI-assisted language editing tools solely for grammatical check and language refinement. The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation of any figure, The authors take full responsibility for the originality and accuracy of the work.

Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Participation in this study was voluntary informed consent was

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