

SOCIAL INTERACTION AMID COVID-19 AND RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC IN SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

This article documents social interaction among rural and urban indigenous communities in Sarawak during the COVID-19 pandemic and their responses to the outbreak at individual, household and community levels. The study on social interaction is crucial to shed light on larger social institutions and to examine how social actions are organized across space and time. The study framed within the symbolic interactionist perspective - emphasize the role of symbols and language as the core elements of social interaction. Research methods used in the study are participant observation and interviews to understand relevant context and process. In participant observation, researchers took part in socio-cultural activities of the community in the villages and their dwellings places in urban areas and participated in social media platforms. Data from observation and interactions (face-to-face or mediated by technology) analysed based on themes and contents. The findings show that social interaction among community members significantly altered during the pandemic in terms of the mode of interactions, frequencies, locations, reasons, duration, types and topics of interactions. These include the shift of face-to-face interactions to digital interactions, reduced numbers of interactions, significant more home-based interactions, and then unequal access to digital interactions. Other findings highlight that cultural themes related to communalism, supernaturalism and family and/or children influenced the community members' engagement in social interactions. The community responses towards the outbreak varied according to the socio-economic background of individuals and households. Through these data the study shed light on how community members interacted during the pandemic; the exchanged of ideas and information, conflict during interactions, responses to the pandemic and the issues surround inequality of access to information and communication technologies.

Keywords: COVID-19, social interaction, inequality, communalism, Sarawak

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Dong, Du and Gardner, 2020). During the discovery, the indigenous people had limited knowledge about COVID-19 and therefore continued with everyday socio-economic activities such as worshipping together, celebrating birthdays and weddings, and ushering into the New Year. Furthermore, in early January 2020 family members in 'exogamic marriage' occupied with the preparation for the Lunar New Year celebration. As at 17 February 2020, the outbreak spread to 27 countries, with more than 70,000 cases (Dong, Du and Gardner, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO)

declared COVID-19 as a pandemic on the 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2021). However, most of the people in the community at the period were unaware of the grave dangers of the pandemic as majority of them were occupied with their economic activities particularly paddy cultivation and clearing weeds from oil palm plantation.

Although there is news reported on the prime media and social media about COVID-19, as a result of unequal access to information the majority of the community members especially the elderly without smart phones and internet connection perceived the pandemic as not alarming. Moreover, during January to March 2020, majority of community members tried to avoid ‘moral panic’ in which they perceived could destruct “culture of the society” (Nicomedes and Anavila, 2020: 14) such as cooperation in agricultural activities and the exchange of labour. The behaviours of the community members guided to some extent by social roles, norms and shared expectations and therefore they perceived reality differently (Giddens and Sutton, 2013).

In [Peninsular] Malaysia, the first case of COVID-19 detected on the 25 January 2020 and the cases traced back to 3 Chinese nationals who previously had close contact with an infected person in Singapore (Elengoe, 2020). On the 15 March 2020 the Crisis Preparedness and Responses Centre (CPRC) and WHO reported that the pandemic spread to 146 countries with 156,162 total cases and 5,612 deaths; Malaysia recorded 238 cases with no death. According to the State Disaster Management Committee (SDMC) chairman, the first cases of COVID-19 in Sarawak recorded on the 13 March 2020 after 3 people tested positive for the virus. 173 persons instructed to be home surveillance and 63 persons under investigation (Sarawak Disaster Information, 2020). All these 236-case associated with religious gathering in the Sri Petaling Mosque in Selangor from 28 February to 1 March 2020.

In Sarawak, the first death from COVID-19 reported by the SDMC on the 17 March 2020 and the victim was a 60-year-old man (Sarawak Disaster Information, 2020; Borneo Post Online, 2020). Following the death of the victim the community members started to pay attention to the danger of COVID-19 as evidenced in their face-to-face conversations and social media interactions. Furthermore, religious leaders in the community started sharing about COVID-19 during their gatherings inside or outside the church.

On the 18 March 2020 the lockdown or Movement Control Order (MCO) introduced to curb the spread of COVID-19. Information on COVID-19 cascaded by respective authorities (e.g. the Ministry of Health and the SDMC) via several platforms including their websites and social media platforms. Announcement via prime media and social media highlighted the need of everyone to practice ‘new normal’ such as physical distancing (of at least 1-meter in public places), avoiding crowded places, washing hands and using face mask. Information related to COVID-19 cascaded by the National Security Council (MKN) via messages sent to the mobile phones of population members. People with access to the internet downloaded MySejahtera (‘My Wellbeing’) application that linked to the Ministry of Health and through MySejahtera, mobile phone users performed several activities including following COVID-19 updates, identify COVID-19 hotspots and check-in with MySejahtera before entering all public premises (e.g. supermarkets and cafes).

Despite the availability of significant information related to COVID-19, the understanding of scientific community about how indigenous community in Sarawak interacted amid the

pandemic and how they cope with 'new normal' is scarce. In the field of sociology, researchers like Lupton (2020), Ward (2020) and Will (2020) suggesting that sociological contribution crucial in understanding social phenomena such as human interaction and impact of COVID-19 on the disadvantage groups such as ethnic minorities. Chua (2020), through her fieldwork acquaintances highlighted digital interactions during COVID-19 among indigenous Bidayuh signified a range of purposes including showing solidarity and reaffirming their identities. Research by Basir, Ab Rahim and Abdul Halim (2020) in Malaysia on behaviours of the society members during the pandemic linked to statistical data on COVID-19 cases. Therefore, this study aims to examine social interaction and everyday life of Kenyah community members during the pandemic and how they responses to the overwhelming situations. Therefore, in the next section, we provided the background of the Kenyah community in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW: FOCUS ON SOCIO-CULTURAL OF KENYAH COMMUNITY

According to Opler (1945: 198), in every culture are found a limited number of dynamic affirmations, called themes, which control or stimulate activity. Following Opler's (1945) framework, Conley (1978: 303-304) identified six dynamic cultural themes which seem to integrate and distinguishes Kenyah of Kalimantan such as supernaturalism, communalism, status and rank, children, rice agriculture and river orientation.

Conley (1974) highlighted that in the life of traditional Kenyah of Kalimantan the theme of supernaturalism was dominant. Liau (2019), based on research among Kenyah of Sarawak identified supernaturalism (in respect to Christianity) is dominant among 'modern' Kenyah. Other important cultural themes are communalism, status, children, road dependent life and rice agriculture (Liau, 2019).

Christianity controlled or stimulated activities of the Kenyah society at individual, household and community levels including the expectation of the need to attend prayer group meetings inside or outside the church, participation in religious gatherings inside or outside the community and involvement in other church-based activities (e.g. fundraising). In the context of Kenyah of Sarawak Christmas celebrated in grand scale at the village level and a range of activities carried out by community members before, during and after Christmas Day such as sports, dancing, singing and visiting. House-to-house visits (*ngabang*) become the most cheerful event during festive seasons because there will be plenty of food served by each household and people visited family members, relatives and friends freely. During Christmas community members enjoyed each other through close proximity illustrated in face-to-face interactions, handshake (regardless of gender) and hugging. Hugging is common practices between parents and young children, grandparents and young children, siblings and close friends of the same gender but the action is uncommon among individuals of opposite gender.

During socio-cultural activities the community members usually greet each other with handshake and spend time talking to each other in close proximity. According to Oxlund (2020: 39), handshake is "...one of the most human gesture: ..." and "...a bodily gesture carrying so many layers of cultural meaning and psychic connotations". Among the Kenyah, handshake is the symbol of trust, peace, respect and friendship. The failure to do handshake during social interaction

with family members, friends and acquaintances may cause a person to be perceived as arrogant. During social activities (e.g. birthday and thanksgiving) at home or outside home the attendees and the hosts expected to handshake and interact jovially. Attendees and hosts also expected to hang around longer after the events which usually ended after several hours.

During the death of a community member, all economic activities in the villages stopped with immediate effect and the community members that are working in the farms expected return the soonest to the longhouse. Due to tradition, in order to pay respect to a deceased family the community members expected behaving in respectful ways such as playing music in low beat, no dancing, laughing and singing loudly. Before, during and after a funeral all members except infant and sick persons required to gather at deceased's home or verandah. Community members expected helping the deceased family members through cash donation, preparation of food and drinks, digging the burial ground (male only) and providing emotional and spiritual support. Furthermore, the failure attending a funeral in the villages may contribute to negative perceptions of villagers towards an individual.

Children of the Kenyah communities expected taking care of ageing parents which correspond to the concept of 'filial piety' among the Chinese community. As a result, children of ageing parents that are working or living outside the villages expected to visit their parents several times every year particularly during festive seasons and public holidays. Community members also valued respect towards the elderly and therefore the failure to visit one's parents considered not proper. An individual that absence from the villages over long period is called 'prodigal' (*tutang*).

Traditionally the Kenyah lived in the longhouse and therefore living in extended family is common in the longhouse of 'modern' Kenyah of Sarawak. Community members in the longhouse share common areas including verandah, community hall and church. These areas are the main places of interactions in their daily life. In urban areas majority of the households are living in nuclear family and they usually interacted at individuals' homes or public places. According to Giddens and Sutton (2013), extended family consist of more than two generations of close relatives living in the same household or in close and continuous relationships with one another while nuclear family consisting of mother, father (or one of these) and dependence children.

In respect to rice agriculture, relevant activities such as clearing the field, paddy planting, weeding and harvesting usually performed in group called *senguyun*. The group work still practiced in the rural Kenyah communities in Belaga District. The first author observed and participated in these activities during the 1970-s to 1990-s in the upper Balui, Rejang River. Rice agriculture practiced among the rural Kenyah of Sarawak but the numbers of hill paddy cultivators in the Bakun Resettlement Scheme (BRS) significant less compared to the period prior the resettlement in 1998. Among the community members that are living near or in the towns the activity related to paddy cultivation absence as they could purchase the rice from the nearby shops or supermarkets.

The background above is crucial in providing understanding about the social life of the Kenyah in Sarawak. The description about the socio-cultural aspects set the scene of this study because we aimed to answer the following research questions:

- i. What are the forms of social interactions among the community members during the pandemic?
- ii. What are the purposes of social interactions among the community members during the pandemic?
- iii. What kind of issues faced by community members in both rural and urban areas and how they cope with the issues?

In the next section, we explained research methods used in the study to gather empirical information including participant observation, open-ended- and semi-structured interviews.

RESEARCH METHODS

During the implementation of the first lockdown in Malaysia (from 18-31 March 2020) due to COVID-19 pandemic, all the populations required stayed at home or worked from home except for working populations in public and private sectors that providing essential services (e.g. doctors, nurses and police). We started examined how the society in Sarawak particularly social media users responded to the pandemic and their adherence to standard operating procedures (SOP) imposed by the government. We discovered the data on the social media of the communities are 'rich' and cover a range of aspects such as the advice to follow SOP and stay at home. After 2-week of observation, we decided studied the Kenyah of Sarawak with focused on the those living in the rural and in urban areas because we planned to study the specific community to obtain more detail, rich, complete, and variety of data (Flyvberg, 2011).

Symbolic interactionism directs this study to the details of interpersonal and digital interaction and how the detail used to make sense of what others say and do (Giddens and Sutton, 2013). We paid attention to interactions of individuals and their households that living in rural and urban areas. Significant numbers of the community members are under the first author 'friends' list in the Facebook. The first author also members of several WhatsApp groups but decided focused on 7-group with the total of 493 members: committee-based, kinship-based, gender-based, school-based, think thank-based, village-based and urban-based. Several languages used in the online interactions such as English, Malay, Kenyah and Iban. Emic and etic research strategies used to understand explanations and criteria of significant in respect to social interaction (either face-to-face or online). According to Kottak (2006), emic is a research strategy that focuses on local explanations and criteria of significant while etic emphasizes the researcher's rather than local's explanations, categories, and criteria of significant.

Participant observations are conducted in Kuching, Kota Samarahan and Serian in a range of places, e.g. in participants' homes and cafes. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended interviews are conducted face-to-face or via Whatsapp and/or phone calls. When travel is allowed by the authority with the purpose to carry out official duties, the fieldworks outside Kuching, Kota Samarahan and Serian conducted in September and December 2020 in order to understand the community members' experiences and interactions during pandemic in several research settings such as Sibu, Kapit, Belaga and BRS and Bintulu. During these fieldworks we engaged in social activities including drinking together at home and interacting at community halls. The study on

social interaction among the community members in rural and urban areas linked to larger social institutions (e.g. health, school and the church).

The mode of transport during the fieldworks included flight, boat express, chartered four-wheeled vehicles, taxi services and personal cars. Sitting in close proximity with other passengers in flights and express boats contributed to knowledge about the use of shared space during pandemic. As a method to obtain data, through the journey we interacting with others trying to understand their experiences of the pandemic. According to Erickson (2011: 11) fieldwork descriptions should not only be holistic and factually accurate but aim “to grasp the native point of view, his relation to life, his vision of his worlds”.

Due to research duties and obligations, the fieldworks conducted in the midst of the pandemic and during those fieldworks significant numbers of community members overwhelming about the COVID-19 cases yet remained cautious about the risk of infection. During social interaction we used facemask and sanitizers and practiced physical distancing. Since we concerned about COVID-19, we also decided not shake hand with peoples we met. Instead we choose putting our hands on the chests as a sign of peace and respect. How we behaved during the field research was a form of ‘impression management’ because people are sensitive to how they seen others.

At the global level, on the 30 September 2020, there are 33,866, 992 cases of COVID-19 with the total of 1,012,992 deaths and impacted 211 countries. On the same date, Malaysia recorded 11,224 cases with 136 deaths (CPRC and WHO). On the 1 December 2020, 67,169 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Malaysia reported; 68,020 confirmed cases (in 2 December 2020); 69,095 confirmed cases (in 3 December 2020); 70,236 confirmed cases (in 4 December 2020); 71,359 (in 5 December 2020); 72,694 confirmed cases (in 6 December 2020) and 74,294 (in 7 December 2020). Borrowing the words of Rose, she felt afraid because of the increasing COVID-19 cases and self-excluded herself from big gatherings.

Topic on colours linked to zones (e.g. Kuching, Sibu and Bintulu) also dominant during interaction between researchers and villagers. The concept of colours (green, yellow, orange and red) used by the authority indicating level of risk and infection in zones: green (for 0-case), yellow (for 1-20 cases), orange (for 21-40 cases) and red (for 41 cases or more). Due to the fear of infection during fieldworks, we requested staying in one empty house avoiding direct contact with others. All interactions carried in open space areas with physical distancing and no handshake. With the alarming increase of COVID-19 cases, we decided not to conduct fieldwork in the other villages in the BRS because we were very concern about own safety and the safety of the villagers.

The research conducted from March 2020 until March 2021 due to movement restrictions between zones and the purpose to gather deeper data. Research among the Kenyah community members that are living in urban areas in Kuching, Kota Samarahan and Serian Divisions are less stressful due to police permit not required because although these areas initially separated into different zones it was later classified under the same zone. In order to obtain richer data, we focused the case study on individuals and their family members in Serian, Kota Samarahan and Kuching. We interacted with Kenyah community members that are working or living in the respective areas with adherence to SOP. These include attending gathering of small numbers of people at individuals’ homes during Gawai (in June 2020) and Christmas.

Data collected are analysed using thematic strategy such as the analysis of cultural themes related to supernaturalism, communalism and children and/or family (refer Conley, 1974; Liao, 2019). Data on the challenges and issues faced by the community members analysed and compared to the wider population's issues including public health and economic impact of COVID-19. Data on the demographic profile of participants (Total participant=40) analysed with Microsoft Excel (Refer Table 1).

The majority of participants in the study are females (30 participants) and 10 participants are males. The age of participants ranged between 21-57 years old. Majority of the participants are living in Kuching and Kota Samarahan. Due to their occupations or marriage commitments all of the participants have migrated from their longhouses (villages) to urban areas. 37 participants are Christians. 3 participants are Muslims and these 3 participants converted to Islam due to the marriage.

Out of the total of 40-participant: 38 participants are the second-generation and 2 participants are the third-generation. The village-based origins making these participants live in two-world: village and town or city and subsequently their experience and views influenced by both worlds.

Table 1: Demographic background of participants

Gender		Percentage
Female	30	75%
Male	10	25%
Religion		
Christian	37	92.5%
Islam	3	7.5%
Age Group		
11-20	0	0
21-30	2	5%
31-40	16	40%
41-50	8	20%
51-60	14	35%
Occupation		
Public sector	13	32.5%
Private sector	6	15%
Business	4	10%
Housewife	16	40%
Self-employed	1	2.5%
Number of children		
0	4	10%
1	4	10%
2	16	40%
3	8	20%
4	6	15%
5	2	5%
Generation		
First Generation	0	0

Second generation	38	95%
Third generation	2	5%
Participants' parent(s) living statuses		
Parent(s) still alive and currently living in the villages	29	72.5%
Parents passed away, stayed in the villages in the past	11	27.5%
Participants' sibling living statuses		
Siblings currently living in the villages	38	95%
Siblings currently living in the towns	12	5%

Source: Research data (2020-2021)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings of this study showed that social interaction at individual, family and community levels amid the pandemic are influenced by communal life, family relationship, religion and technology. The findings and discussion are explained under several components: social interaction, communalism, supernaturalism, family and/or children, and issues.

Social interaction and everyday life

The pandemic impacted social interaction and everyday life of the community members in both rural and urban areas due to the advised by the authority and the fear of infection the frequently of face-to-face interactions reduced significantly to interactions related to family affairs, grocery shopping and work. No big gatherings of community members during birthdays, thanksgivings and festive celebrations carried out. Furthermore, on the 18 December 2020, SOP in respect to Christmas released which stated that the celebration only celebrated on the first day among close family members with not more than 20-person. During the outbreak more community members interacting through their mobile phones because they treat digital interaction intrinsic to their everyday life. Many community members either in the towns and villages lament of feeling missing their family members. Although the pandemic restricted their physical mobility and social interaction they have to be patient in their everyday life and patient is one of core virtue that valued by the community. Patient is also valued in Malay culture (Goddard, 2001) as portrayed during long queues in the supermarkets and banks.

Almost all everyday life activities in small groups confined to specific reasons such as cooking and eating together among members of the same household. The social engagements usually carried during day time in the weekend and the duration shortened. Sue for instance stated that they usually had 'potluck' dinners at 7.00 pm and ended at 10.00 p.m. and they usually skipped karaoke session. Gathering among community members took place at individuals' homes but pictures of the gatherings seldom or not shared on social media due to the fear of being criticized by netizens or risk of being fine of 1,000 Ringgit or more if proven breaking the rules imposed by the government.

On the 9 January 2021, COVID-19 infections reported in Pasai Siong, Sibul with 37 confirmed cases and subsequently caused 8-longhouse under lockdown and therefore contribute

to fear and worry. In dealing with epidemics and pandemics (e.g. SARS and H1N1 influenza or swine flu) people drew historical imagery of the plague and the fear of infection subsequently contributed to social exclusion (Manderson and Levine, 2020). Peoples living in zones with higher infection cases, refrained from travelling to the villages without solid reasons or approval from the police because they are responsible ensuring the virus not spread to the rural areas. With the first case of COVID-19 in Belaga District reported on the 20 February 2020, the community members in the villages have become more fearful and vigilant. Every village in the BRS tried protecting their community by preventing or monitoring the interactions with outsiders via putting up notices, keeping the record of visitors and putting blockage on the main entrance.

As a result of fear of infection and the possible penalty for breaking rules and laws the community members observed following the SOP more strictly since the first week of January 2021 onwards. It is common observing recorded messages or written notes on WhatsApp groups requesting the members not viral their pictures on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. For instance, during 3-funeral in January 2021 and 2-funeral in February 2021 in Uma Baha Village, the community members follow strictly the SOP and the members of the Village Welfare and Security (JKKK) reminded everyone to follow SOP. Funeral duration shortened to 1-2 nights and cremations performed as fast as possible. Young children, the elderly and sick persons not allowed mingle with others during the funerals.

The level of involvement of community members in social media interactions varied according factors such as age, gender, living place and internet access. Community members that are actively interacting on social media: aged 50-year-old and below; and living in urban areas. Community members living in villages with patchy or without internet connectivity obtained the information on COVID-19 at slower rate and significant amount of information are secondary. The community members living in rural areas and small bazaars also complained about patchy internet coverage illustrated in Facebook's page of Belaga News on the 10 March 2021:

CELCOM, DIGI & TM Unifi getting worse slow in Belaga. ...Customers paid their bills for what? Cannot just wait for customers to complain right? Manager or staff members are not using the internet of mobile phone data? Almost every day every week lines cut off or interrupted. Customers' money they took (bills are paid) but the service terrible and as if there is no effort to improve the bad service. Complain to KKMM?

The topics of interactions in 7-WhatsApp groups include COVID-19, promotion of food items for sale, spirituality, socio-economic activities and current affairs at local and national levels. For instance, following the administration of the first vaccine on the 24 February 2021, the discussion on vaccination dominating the topics of social interaction among the community members include the need to register via MySejahtera and not fear of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Community members' participation in digital interactions more active following the occurrence of deaths: messages of condolences written by both community members living in rural and urban areas. During the death of a community member, donation of money to the deceased family carried out among the villagers via collection at community level through their representatives, direct donation in the donation box placed in the deceased family's verandah and

transactions via online banking. The donated money used to cover cost related to the funeral such as for food and drinks, purchased casket and performed funeral rites after burial.

The community members valued respect in their everyday life particularly during face-to-face interactions and interactions mediated by technology. Families socialized their young children respecting others particularly the elderly and their own parents. However, in digital interactions a few community members observed crossing the line by using demeaning and insulting words. Due to the used of 'social control', that is indirect coercion in the form of written messages by other community members: reprimanding an individual for saying bad words or insulting others, and the wrong doers made public apology in written forms or recorded voices. Usually the wrongdoers exited a particular WhatsApp group to avoid shame associated with her or his behaviours. During the conflict between individuals in online interactions, most community members in the social groups preferred remained 'neutral' in order to prevent the conflict to become more complicated.

Family and/or children

As highlighted in Table 1 above 29 participants' parent(s) still alive and currently living in the villages while 11 participants' parents had passed away. 38 of the participants' siblings still living in the villages while only 2 participants' siblings living in the towns.

Family is a universal phenomenon and therefore the theme on family and/or children dominant among these community members. Participants spoke of longing for their parents, staying far away from the towns or vice versa. Rose, who is living alone in the village, said that she missed her children and grandchildren that are living in Kuching and Sarikei. She hoped "...they will visit her during Christmas" [2020] for family reunion. Out of 40 participants, 21 persons went back to the villages between January to December 2020. The reasons for their journey to the villages are visiting their parents or family members, attending funerals of the close family members, celebrating Christmas and attending close family members' weddings. However, since 1 January 2021 all the individuals and their households never go back to their villages nor do their family members in the villages visit them because of the restriction of movement between zones in Sarawak.

The mode of interactions with family members also are adapted and transformed through the use of technology such as smart mobile phones and computers so that they can continue communicating despite living in different space and time. While most individuals under 50-year-old are technology-savvy users, parents above 60-year-old have to learn using smart phones so that they can interact with their children in urban areas. Families with schooling children impacted due to the need to purchase smart mobile phones so that the children can take part in online classes due to the closure of schools for months and enabled their children interacting with their teachers and friends online. However, poor households in the community struggled financially to provide platforms for their children to study online due to the need to purchase gadgets and internet data.

The interaction between household members significantly confined at their own homes especially for family with young children or aging parents. 21-year-old Darren said that he agreed stayed at home because school is closed and his parents requested him looking after his 10-year-old sibling. Although he spoke of feeling bored because he hardly went out meeting his friends but

he spoke of his bonding with his sibling getting closer. Darren spoke of cooking and baking together with his family members to kill the boredom of staying at home during the pandemic. The celebrations of birthdays and wedding anniversaries at household level also confined to participants own households. In addition to follow SOP to prevent the spread of the virus, participants and their family members also did not throw 'big' parties during birthday to save money because they are not sure how long the pandemic is going to be. 49-year-old Sue said that his son requested her not to buy birthday cake during his birthday and therefore she cooked food for them in moderate way. The money allocated for birthday was given by Sue to his son on his birthday as requested. Participants and their family members in urban areas prepared and enjoyed their meals at home more frequently and they seldom eat outside due to the rising cost of eating out. 50-year-old Jana prepared very simple meals (1-2 dishes) for her family to cope with the rising cost of living, Ena planted vegetables to avoid buying from the markets and Limah used digital platforms for online business.

Supernaturalism

The post below was taken from a participant, called Donna.

3 of my family tested positive again for COVID-19 today. Pray for them. Thank you so much (Donna, Facebook's post, 22 January 2021).

Her family members scattered throughout places in Sarawak such as in the village and in towns. Prior to the post one of her family member in Sibu was tested positive for COVID-19 and instructed by doctor to quarantine at the government premise. Donna's post shared in the community members' relevance WhatsApp groups requested for prayers support. A week after Donna's post, her stepfather passed away due to COVID-19. Community members in both urban and rural areas extended their emotional and spiritual support to her family. The posts, comments and sharing in social media platforms demonstrated 'scalable sociality' (Borgersen and Miller, 2016) in/beyond individuals' homes in Sarawak.

The COVID-19 also influenced the religious activities and practices of community members. Although almost all church services not conducted face-face for almost a-year, the community members with access to the internet in the villages and urban areas worshipping together online and they helped praying for each other. The transformation of the way how the community members performed their religious beliefs in line with social constructionist position that stated religion is "...continually reproduced and changed in everyday interaction processes" (Giddens and Sutton, 2013). As taking communion crucial for Christians, the pandemic shifted the engagement of believers into digital communion. The collection of money as the offering to church carried out in the villages through representative of each block of the longhouses. However, some community members still prefer face-to-face church services compared to online services. For instance, Sue said, "Last year [2020] I attended only less than 5 church services. None since January 2021." Sue also hope that the pandemic will be over the soonest so that they can worship together in the church.

Furthermore, supernaturalism influenced the social interaction of the community members during the pandemic in supernatural ways. These include the requests to pray for individuals that are sick or going to take taking swab test as portrayed in a participant's experience. Amy informed that one of staff member in Palma Headquarters Sibu was infected by COVID-19 on the 24 February 2021 and therefore all staff members required taking COVID-19 swab test the next day. Amy requested for prayer support for her family, her husband who was working in the respective company and her husband colleagues. She wrote lengthy notes in two WhatsApp groups for the purpose of getting prayer support.

Amy's experience of praying together digitally with family members, friends and community members is a form of 'collective effervescence' in Durkheim's concept (1965). Data on WhatsApp groups showed that older members always reminded others to stay calm and pray in whatever situations during the pandemic. The members of WhatsApp also tried remained hopeful despite facing uncertainty in regards to COVID-19. For instance, after the results of the swab test released the members of the community said the prayers of thank and praise.

Praying for each other during COVID-19 pandemic illustrated that the community members valued solidarity and sense of support within their groups such as within the circle of their family, friends, classmates and community.

Communalism

Communalism observed in the Kenyah community especially among those living in the rural areas. The longhouse structures include verandah, common room, kitchen and dining area and first floor. Verandah is public area and it provided a platform for communal life while the later three areas can be considered private spaces. The community members usually interacted in the verandah, community hall, church or other public spaces. However, due to the sharing of verandah and living in close proximity, the community members have challenge practicing physical distancing particularly among young children. Communal verandah is platform for young children playing with peers in safe environment and without strict supervision from adult. We observed that adult tried their best curbing the spread of the virus by following SOP despite in certain occasions individuals broke the rules and expectations.

Although the community members enjoyed one another, for instance the practice of eating together in groups on the verandah the practice impacted during the pandemic. Every villager is expected trying their best protecting their community by practicing physical distancing, practicing hygiene and avoid crowded places. The community members that are working in public and private sectors such as nurses and teachers in the BRS showered quickly after they returned to their longhouses after work because they concerned about the safety of their own family and other villagers. The spread of COVID-19 in longhouses in other areas in Sarawak due to social gatherings have contributing to significant worries and fear among the community members (Borneo Post Online, 2021). The fear of infection also excluded individuals (e.g. people with disability or people living with chronic illnesses) from social interaction in the community.

Among the community members in urban areas, the sense of communal life, affected by the structure of their living areas that are located separately in Kuching, Kota Samarahan and

Serian. All of the participants in the study are living in housing estates with other ethnic groups. Although they have adapted to 'modern' lifestyles they still have strong sense of identity associated to their ethnicity and almost all hoping to spend their holiday in the villages after the pandemic is over. Although participants could reach the home of each other between 15-minute to 1-hour drive (without congested traffic) they avoided gathering in big group due to the fear of infection that will be associated with their ethnicity and subsequently shame.

Issues among the Community Members

All aspects of life among the community members impacted in uneven ways during the pandemic which explained in this section. Due to the requirement of 'stay at home' for prolong period of time several participants complained about being overweight, overeating and lack of exercise. Participants with no stable incomes (e.g. self-employed and small business) experienced stress due to worries and financial problems. However, these participants received support from family members and friends to cope with the feeling of overwhelming and they use a range of strategies coping with stress such as through prayers and engagement in their hobbies.

Participants with children in primary and secondary schools experienced sympathetic feelings towards their children due to prolong periods of no schooling and they expressed worry about their children become addicted to mobile phones or online games. Since education is importance for upward mobility among the community members, participants with children in primary and secondary schools and tertiary concerned about the academic performance of their children. Julica whose children are at colleges concerned about her children intellectual development as too long absence from face-to-face learning may affect her children cognitive development. Participants with young adult children concerned about their children future because the impact of economy such as the rising numbers of unemployment, inflation and downsizing among many private companies. Participants and their children living in the poor households experienced tremendous pressure due to limited resources, for instance Sonia spoke of using the personal saving to purchase food items and to pay for bills and utilities. Sonia and her 15-year-old daughter tried selling food so that they could lighten the financial burden but she complained that the volume of sales was low.

Participants from poor families received the financial support from the government but they said the support not enough because the pandemic is dragging too long. Participants with member(s) currently working in government sectors observed coping well but they also practiced frugality due to uncertainty linked to the pandemic. Working participants in urban areas shared small amount of their money with parents in villages so they can help their parents coping with the financial impact of the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 to economy also influenced participants and their households, for instance several participants and families struggling to pay for their mortgage (i.e. cars and houses installments or rents). Although all participants with loan commitments experienced moratorium for 6-month (from April to September 2020) community members that experienced job retrenchment grieved of being unable paying their loans. The grievance of unemployed community members especially those living in urban areas is an example of inevitable impact of economic collapse and bitter reality they have to face as Malaysia's

unemployment rate in December 2020 was 4.8% (772,900) and rose to 4.9% (782,500) in January 2021 (The Edge Markets, 2021). These official statistical figures excluded the community members who work in the informal economy reflected in the experience of young participants living with their parents in urban areas of Kuching and Kota Samarahan.

The findings of this study also highlighted the reaction of the community members towards the nation-state to control COVID-19 portrayed in basic mode of emotional expressions (i.e. happy, sad, disgust and angry). They showed happiness towards front-liners staff members (e.g. doctors, nurses and police) in carrying out their duties because they acknowledged the importance of those workers' services. They also expressed sadness, disgust and anger towards others that not following SOP such not practicing 'social' distancing, not wearing face masks and not practicing personal hygiene. For example, Sue said, "Feeling gross. Some people didn't used [food] thongs when they touched the meat and fish in the markets" and Alan felt uncomfortable whenever he visited the clinic or hospital for medical treatment.

CONCLUSION

Data from this study show that inequality in respect to social interactions (face-to-face or digital interactions) unevenly experienced at individual, household and community levels. At individual level, young children, people with chronic illnesses, people with disability and aging parents excluded in interactions outside homes due to the views of family members of the need to protect them from infection. The children of participants in poor households (e.g. young children and teenagers) experienced limited digital interactions with friends due to the inability to purchase internet data and up-to-date gadgets. Similarly, participants' parents that are living in rural areas that are not tech-savvy and poor (e.g. 60-year-old and above) experienced limited digital interactions with their children and family members. Housewives experienced boredom and stress due to limited social interactions with friends, limited physical mobility and prolonged stay at homes with young children.

At household level, poor households experience limited interactions outside homes compared to financially stable households due to the need to save money to purchase food items and paying their bills. Participants and their household members in poor households also experienced limited digital interactions with their family members and siblings in the villages or towns due to priority given to their own household basic needs. In the words of Meri who was living the BRS: "Sometimes I asked my siblings to top up my mobile phones data but I cannot do that frequently because they also have commitment".

At community level, villagers with no internet coverage in their areas cut off from digital interactions. Although face-to-face interactions at their villages taking place but their communication with other villages limited due to the fear of infection and internet connectivity. Data from the fieldworks in the villages showed that the transmission of knowledge on COVID-19 from the authority to the villages affected in terms of the speed, amount and the quality of information. Villagers with no internet connectivity usually obtained secondary information from the family members and respective government agencies (e.g. district office, health and education).

Based on the data on the cultural themes (supernaturalism, communalism and children and/or family) that emerged from the study, these themes controlled and stimulated the activities of participants, their households and their community. Although supernaturalism and children and/or family themes dominant among both rural and urbans community members, communalism in urban areas significantly affected by spatiality and governmentality. In contrast, communalism in longhouse challenged during the pandemic due to the instructions from the authority to practice social distancing (e.g. avoiding big social gatherings) and physical distancing. The pandemic has caused individuals and community members living in the longhouse with close proximity continue negotiate and renegotiate values, time and space which portrayed during funerals including whether to bring or not a corpse to the longhouses.

Although the concept fear appeared in social interactions (face-to-face and digital interactions) before the ‘time’ of COVID-19, fear of infection during the pandemic significantly felt by participants, their household members and community members subsequently affected how they interacted and coped with challenges and issues related to health, economy and emotions. Fear of infection, fear of getting sick and fear of death due to COVID-19 impacted all participants regardless of their socio-economic background. In coping with fear the community members subscribed to the concept of hope and faith in supernatural power as observed in many communities at the local, national and global levels.

Lastly, although the government particularly health authority emphasized more on personal and collective responsibilities in curbing the COVID-19, the idea more challenging when people are living in close proximity, have limited access to resources (e.g. money to buy face masks), individuals experience the loss of incomes and working in places with poor or absent hygiene and sanitation. Thus to cope with the impact of COVID-19 required the need rethinking values and norms of the village-based society (e.g. communalism), spatiality (e.g. living in close proximity in the longhouses), accessibility (e.g. to the ICT) and governmentality (e.g. the control movements between places and the administration of COVID-19 vaccines).

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