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PAGANISM, ANIMISM OR POLYTHEISM: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LABELLING AND CATEGORISATION OF TRADITIONAL¹ BELIEF SYSTEM OF THE KADAZANDUSUN

Low Kok On and Sanen Marshall

ABSTRACT

The article surveys the difficulties associated with the attempts to describe the Kadazandusun belief system, which includes attempts to label it as pagan, animist or polytheist. The characteristics of the traditional Kadazan Dusun belief system are compared against these three concepts and the authors observe that both animistic and polytheistic elements are present. The authors highlight the fact that the Kadazan Dusun once believed in a hierarchy of deities. They show the similarities between Kadazandusun polytheism and the polytheistic forms of belief found in well-known civilisations such as Greece and China. Besides, the authors argue that the Kadazan Dusun are not pagan but they did possess their own belief system before the majority of them embraced the Christian and the Muslim faiths. By approaching the subject in this manner, it is hoped that a more accurate understanding of the traditional belief system of the Kadazan Dusun people can subsequently be obtained. More importantly, this article establishes beyond doubt that the traditional Kadazandusun do in fact possess a system of belief, one that is a folk religion in its own right.

Keywords: Kadazandusun, paganism, animism, polytheism, folk religion

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers of the traditional belief system of the Kadazandusun have labelled it 'animist,' or considered it as 'pagan' or have altogether refused to categorise it. Whelan (1970: 35) notes, for example:

The Dusun pagan belief is not a religion of hope or trust or thanksgiving. It is mostly one of begging Spirits to leave one alone. Life is very dark for the pagan...

Suraya Sintang (2007: 58), in her study also stated that before the coming of the Christian and Islamic religions to Sabah, the Kadazandusun people were considered 'pagan.' Curiously, Abdul Jaffear Henry (1987: 260), in his study of the Dusun made the observation that they "are without religion or pagan," but adds that they have a 'polytheistic' type of religion. Likewise, Jihek Haji Basanu (1987: 287) qualified his views when writing about the beliefs of the Dusun people by saying that although these people are "pagan", they nevertheless believe in the existence of a single God known as Kinorohingan (variously spelt). Evans (1978: 152), on the other hand, while maintaining the notion of 'primitive' with regard to the Dusun people, labels them as animists who believe that all objects in their surroundings possess spirits, rather than being simply pagan. Because of this belief, daily life would be strongly oriented towards injunctions and taboos.

In contrast to the authors who have used the terms pagan, animist or polytheist to describe the traditional belief system of the Kadazandusun, there is a second group of authors who have merely written about this belief system without attempting to categorise it. Williams (1965), when writing about the belief system of the Dusun in the Tambunan District, noted that their society was influenced by the belief in a supernatural world. It was a world that was supposed to be inhabited by seven types of spirit-beings, as well as good and bad powers that were not visible. Williams (1965) did not, however, use a specific term or label in regard to the traditional beliefs of the

Tambunan Dusun. Hurlbut (1986: 111), who studied the traditional belief system of the Kadazan people of the Labuk District in the East Coast of Sabah, also mentioned that the beliefs of the Labuk Kadazan are centred on a world of spirits. And like Williams (1965) she did not give a specific name to their beliefs. And then there is Phelan (2005: 86-7), who in his study, noted that the indigenous people of Sabah practised 'a type of religion' before the coming of Christianity but he did not go on to state what kind of religion it was.

Based on the above quotes, it is clear that there is no one special label – and often no label at all – that is uniformly used by researchers who study the Kadazandusun belief system. During the main author's recent field trips aimed at collecting folk tales in various districts of Sabah, many Christian and Muslim Kadazandusun informants also considered their parents and great grandparents to be pagan. The question is, therefore, before the arrival of world religions in Sabah like Christianity and Islam, were the Kadazandusun pagan, animist or polytheist?

In attempting an answer, the authors will first investigate characteristics and ideas associated with the traditional beliefs of the Kadazandusun people. Subsequently, the characteristics will be compared with the taxonomic characteristics of animistic and polytheistic belief systems in order to derive a rough impression of the Kadazandusun belief system. Subsequently, a comparison of Kadazandusun beliefs with the beliefs of other cultures will also be carried out. Comparative studies are effectively done by researchers in the fields of sociology, anthropology and the humanities for the purpose of identifying typical characteristics, making generalisations and giving explanations about wide-ranging phenomena connected with social-cultural institutions and practices. These generalisations and explanations can be presented as a hypothesis, which can be subsequently confirmed by comparing various cultures (Apte, 1983: 201). By doing this, it is hoped that a more accurate characterisation about the type of belief system of the Kadazandusun, which is an

important aspect of their traditional identity, can be subsequently obtained.

Research Background

The Kadazandusun are the majority population in Sabah. The 2010 Sabah State Population Census reported that there are a total of 545,700 Kadazandusun in comparison to other Bumiputera (448,800), Bajau (398,100), Malay (362,700), Chinese (280,600), Murut (97,300) and Others (148,700) [Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011]. They occupy a huge portion of the land in Sabah and are made up of 40 ethnic groups. Some of these ethnic groups in turn feature sub-ethnic groups (Topin, 1996: 3). In other words, the scope of study of the 'the traditional beliefs of the Kadazandusun' encompasses a geographical region of nearly all Sabah (North Borneo) and they belong to four main ethnic groups, which include several sub-ethnic groups. The writers will thus discuss the features of the traditional beliefs of the Kadazandusun based on examples from a number of major Kadazandusun ethnic groups. These include the Liwan and the Tuhawon in the Tambunan District, the Tangara in the Penampang District, the Lotud in the Tuaran District, the Tobilung in the Kota Belud District, the Rungus in the Kudat District, the Gana in the Keningau District, the Dusun in the Ranau District and the Eastern Kadazan in the Labuk-Kinabatangan Districts. In this piece of work, the name 'Kadazandusun' is used as though in reference to a single socio-cultural entity, as is the tendency of the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA) (Topin, 1996: 3). However, specific ethnic group names such as Kadazan, Lotud, Rungus, Ranau Dusun, Tambunan Dusun, Kimaragang Dusun, Tobilung Dusun and many more are used when our analysis specifically targets these ethnic groups.

Between Paganism, Animism and Polytheism

The term 'pagan' is used for those who are without religion (Abdul Jaffear Henry, 1987: 260). The word originates in Latin, *paganus*,

which means a villager. This term is synonymous with the related concept of primitive and uncivilised. The word pagan was used since the early period of the Greco-Roman Church in reference to those who did not follow Christian teachings and it connoted people who did not worship the true God. During the Crusades, this term was used by Christians against Muslims (Mat Zin, 2003: 17). In the modern sense, the term pagan is used for any member of society that does not worship God as is done by the believers of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam (*Ensiklopedia Indonesia*, 1984: 2504). From this, it is clear that the term pagan is not a religion of the past but only refers to members of society who do not practise any form of religion.

Animism refers to an early concept which was pioneered by the founder of modern anthropology, Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917). In this connection, Bolle (1995: 297-298) noted that:

Tylor proposed the term animism for the study of "the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings, which embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy." He called his concept a minimum definition of religion.

For the primitive, the dream-world would not be less real than the waking state. In reflections such as these on the spirits of the dead and the ghosts perceived in dreams, Tylor saw the first forms of a religious signature.

Tylor (Malinowski, 1954: 18), noted that primitive beliefs start with the idea of animism. Subsequently, he stressed that animistic beliefs originate from a misinterpretation of dreams and the belief that something actually exists which in reality does not exist.

Malinowski (1954: 18) gives an additional explanation about Tylor's theory of animism when he says that animism refers to the beliefs of humans in supernatural objects in their surroundings. In other words, animism is a belief that is naturalistic and is closely