

MAKING SENSE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S SOCIAL DISTANCING AND THE EMERGENCE OF VILLAGE BASED DISEASE SURVEILLANCE IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS OF SARAWAK

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Abstract: The introduction of social distancing as a measure to slow the spread of disease related to COVID-19 has led to ongoing debate about its disruptive effects around the world. There is a wide variation in the response and the use of the measures to counter the pandemic. Drawing on cultural analysis, this paper aims to explicate the socio-cultural reasons for these differences. To this end, this paper throws light on a rural village in Sarawak to provide insight how local perspectives and interpretations have shaped community response to national mechanisms to curtail the spread of COVID-19 disease. This is by examining playful and colourful texts of local dialogues, narratives and anecdotes encountered via *WhatsApp* chats as the villagers negotiate to make sense of Malaysia's movement control order (MCO). It argues that as social distancing measures begun to intersect with their perceptions of home and reorient their daily activities and cultural practices, the community tap into their village narratives and shared experiences in order to reconstruct a sense of meaning and order. Out of this, they formulate a village-based disease surveillance protocols, strategies and framework. The finding affirms growing calls for greater integration of socio-cultural approaches to health care strategies.

Keywords: Movement control order, COVID-19, social distancing, Kelabit Highlands, sense-making analysis.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold. One is to contribute to the ongoing debates associated with the fierce enforcement of globalised coronavirus lockdowns. These measures have been considered to be highly disruptive to society; hence they are those who questioned their efficacies. For instance, the accounts by Stith (2020), Suppawittaya, Yiemphat and Yasri (2020) and also by Marroquin, Vine and Morgan (2020). Throwing light on different scenarios, they provide an overview of effects of the lockdowns, stay home policies and social distancing behaviour on society at large. Second is to explore the claim that the effectiveness of the measures largely depends on the population willingness to adhere to them (Milne & Xie, 2020, p.1). That is, rapid changes in population behaviour, specifically how people are adjusting and responding are crucial to the success of these protective measures. As highlighted by Kwok

K., Li *et al.* (2020, p.1575): "The behaviors of the public are important for outbreak management, particularly during the early phase when no treatment or vaccination is available and nonpharmaceutical interventions are the only options. The efficacy of nonpharmaceutical interventions depends on persons' degree of engagement and compliance in precautionary behaviors, such as face-mask wearing, hand hygiene, and self-isolation."

Yet at the same time, the public may face different variations of the protective measures. A good example of this has been provided by Nyers Williams. He says, "Different countries have different minimum distances which they advise their citizens to maintain. This varies from 1 m as advised by the World Health Organization (WHO), Singapore and Hong Kong, to 1.5 m in Australia. The USA advises 1.8 m (the equivalent of six feet) and the UK, Ireland and New Zealand favour 2 m." He

emphasizes, “Adhering to guidance on safe distancing does depend on the public both knowing the recommended distance and being able to accurately judge that distance when out of the house. This is to understand what they need to do in their everyday lives to stay clear and stay safe” (Williams, 2020, p.305).

This then raises questions such as how would community adjust their behaviours in certain ways in order to comply with the lockdown measures? Do these behavioural adjustments depend on sociocultural meanings or individuals’ awareness and their ability to perceive risks associated with the virus and adapt their safety behaviours accordingly? Will they adjust the measures to be appropriate for the local contexts?

Guided by these questions, this paper turns to a small Kelabit village in the Kelabit Highlands to highlight how rural villagers in the mountainous region of Sarawak community reconstruct a sense of order because of the disruption of the pandemic and make sense of the prevention measures against COVID-19 as introduced by the national government of Malaysia. The focus is the ways in which the MCO procedures intersect with village everyday life and their broad understanding of home and the forest surrounding their village as the “supermarket” for their daily sustenance.

The paper attains this by using interpretative processes of making sense of the pandemic within frameworks considered meaningful by the villagers. This is by analysing the content of local dialogues and discussions about how the MCO has reoriented social practices in the village. By doing this the author aims to raise concerns whether or not the notion of social distancing as global, unified ‘health force’ threatens to mask the diversity and differences in the actual conditions and its impacts on society. The argument is that in a world of globalized health governance, it is generally expected to have a global meaning on social distancing. However, as will be portrayed through this paper the meanings of social distancing are not necessarily inherently stable but rather

context-dependent, localized and dependent on social understanding. This suggests that paying attention to local meaning making and heterogeneity of perceptions and experiences can contribute towards cross-cultural analysis of the meaning of “Social Distancing” in the face of a specific yet widespread health crisis at a global scale. For this reason, this article affirms growing calls for greater integration of socio-cultural approaches to health care crises.

With that, the next section of this article will provide a brief background context which will be followed by a brief overview of the notion of meaning making, social distancing and COVID-19 pandemic. A section on methods for data collection will follow suit. The next section will highlight discussions and findings, and the final section will conclude the paper.

Background Context

Pa umur is one of the thirteen Kelabit villages found in the Kelabit Highlands of Sarawak in East Malaysia. At an altitude of approximately 1000 m, the Highlands is the traditional homeland of the Kelabit people.

Located on the west bank of the Pa Debpur River, one of the two main rivers that flow through the Highlands and the village consists of a longhouse, a number of detached homes, a community church and an airstrip. Based on church membership BEM Pa Umur, 56 persons out of 200+ members of the village are still living in the village, while the rest live in cities and towns in Malaysia and beyond. Currently, their communal living has been supported and nurtured by the village church (Amster, 1998). In fact, the church is central to their everyday life. It is where they meet to worship and pray as well as to exchange information. The village church is also a social institution through which they extend help and support to one another.

Like other villages in the area, it is bounded by land covered in thick forest. The surrounding terrain on both sides of the Pa Debpur River are covered by a patchwork of low-stature kerangas forest (*payah*) secondary forest (*amug*)

interspersed with buffalo paddocks (*laman*), gravity-irrigated padi fields and rice farms, farm sheds (*lepo padey*), fruit gardens/orchards (*ira bua*), larger planted trees, streams and fish ponds (*takung luang*).

The village is a community – a political and social group with many functions which people are committed to by birth and bound by many ties. It has its own social organisation rooted in values of cohesiveness, sharing and caring. As a longhouse-based community, kinship and family are the cornerstones of the social organisation. As a source of self-identification, the villagers identify themselves as *lun Pa Umur* – the people of Pa Umur. Traditionally, people belong to their village in a way they belong to no other social groups.

Despite the transformations of recent decades due to high levels of rural-urban migration, the importance of kinship relations in daily life is still observed. Many left the village for education, job opportunities and marriages. However, there are high levels of movement back and forth between cities and the village which is made possible by three daily flights from Miri to Bario and by a 431 km on long winding logging road. These are important means to transport necessities which may not be readily available in the Highlands. It is also connected to many villages across the border to East Kalimantan – strong cross-border kinship relations that go back hundreds of years (Bala, 2001).

Over the last five years, mobile and smartphones have facilitated the maintenance and the strengthening of weak connections and affiliations of Pa Umur people. The move from rural areas to the urban areas has contributed to the weakening of village solidarity. But today they are connected on smartphones and more general ethnographic observations confirm that social media plays a major role in maintaining contacts between members of widespread members of the village. In this context, smartphone has been adopted to keep alive and reignite relationships with members migrated around the region and the country.

It is against this background that this paper highlights how members of the village negotiate to make sense in the context of their own circumstances the etiquette of social and physical distancing, which had been introduced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as measures to slow the spread of COVID-19. Their views and concerns are expressed via *WhatsApp* through playful and colourful local dialogues and wider discussions about the disease and MCO rules and procedures. Like everywhere else in Sarawak the WhatsApp app become the important means for wider discussions and information about the diseases and MCO rules and procedures. Since the app permits text messages, calls (including video calls) and sharing of pictures and videos both user to user and through groups of up to 250 people, it facilitates daily communication and news exchanges. This involved communal discussions between urban and rural members of the community focusing on how they ought to adjust their actions.

Framing Meaning of Social Distancing Cross-culturally During COVID-19 Pandemic

Meaning making has been a point of interest for scholars in social sciences for decades. Although difficult to define, scholars (e.g. Frankle, 1963) pointed out ‘meaning’ is of paramount importance in human life. Its importance has led to various attempts by scholars to define meaning and how meanings are constructed (e.g. Baumeister, 1991; Hannerz, 1992; Lofland & Lofland 1996; Chen, 2001). Notably ‘meaning’ is the underlying motivation behind thoughts and decisions that are enacted into actions and behaviour (cf. Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obsfield, 2005).

Over the years, disaster researchers have highlighted the role of meaning making in adaptation to disaster by focusing on the making sense of the disaster and finding ways to adjust and adapt to the situation. Earlier accounts by Hoffman (1999) and also by Oliver-Smith (2002) project this trend. Both authors have highlighted how disasters challenged people’s

worldview and why it generates a need to reconstruct a sense of meaning and order in the disruption and destruction. Other scholars echo their arguments in subsequent works. For instance, in 2010, Crystal Park says, "meaning appears particularly important in confronting highly stressful life experiences, and much recent research has focused on meaning making (i.e., the restoration of meaning) in the context of highly stressful situations" (Park, 2010, p.247). This statement is echoed through increased efforts to understand how people do make sense of disasters and how sense making informs and influence peoples' actions. Good examples are the works of Coleman and Neimeyer, (2014); Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi and McMillan, (2000); Park and Folkman, (1997); Greenberg, (1995).

Currently, meaning making as a useful coping strategy in negative situation has been adopted to explore how communities cope with COVID-19. The reports by Yang, *et al.* (2021), Walsh (2020) and also by Morgan (2020) are good pointers. They provide a glimpse into the significance of meaning making as societies cope with the social, political and economic ordering of society as a result of COVID-19 crisis. Nonetheless, these accounts tend to focus on surface similarities and homogenizing of differences and hence subsumed the influence of socio-cultural factors on variation in meanings, experiences, and on specificities of actions and responses to the pandemic. They overlooked Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions of how humans make sense of the world not only through a continuous production of meaning, but also by taking the form of ideas, experiences, myths, norms, understanding, worldviews and beliefs. His suggestion is useful when considering diversity of responses and cultural factors in designing global distancing activities under the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides perspective to study differences in human behaviours across the world.

Toan Luu Duc Huynh (2020) is one of the few that had examined the role of the cultural dimension in practising social distancing across the world under the current pandemic. His

findings suggest cultural factors such as meaning have implications on effective communications to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

Besides Toan Luu Duc Huynh, the GlobeSmart (2020) has also carried out a survey for insights into cross cultural meanings and implications of social distancing in different countries. Their "Cultural etiquette and social distancing around the world," (2020) highlights the variations in worldwide response to social distancing by arguing that cultural values and social practices play important roles in shaping why and how people respond to the measures. For instance, it is found out that wearing of masks in public places amongst the Japanese and Singaporeans is widely accepted. For the Japanese it is culturally appropriate and in fact not to do so is considered to be inconsiderate. Whereas in Singapore they welcomed stricter social distancing directives even though these may challenge local cultural norms and etiquette. This is because the Singaporeans are long used to adhering to governmental directives and law. The Japanese and Singaporean attitudes differ greatly to those of the Indians in India where by social distancing is a challenge because of their communal based life style. For example, going to worship at a temple, mosque, or church is an essential part of daily life for many Indians. In fact, during the pandemic these local institutions are expected to play important roles in keeping the community together; however, they have had to be shut down instead.

The differences between Sweden and other parts of the world, for instance with Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, were also highlighted. While Sweden's population easily adopted social distancing measures because of the cultural importance of solitude and respect of each other's private space, the mandatory mask is deemed as an infringement on individual freedom and goals in other places in Europe and North America. Hence slogans such as "we're all in this together," which might work well in collective based culture, may not be effective in these countries.

What these trends suggest is that a one-size-fits-all approach to implement measures and communicate message about COVID-19 pandemic need to be seriously reconsidered. In fact, there are arguments, for instance by Dr Nelson Vergara, the head of the First Nations Department at Chile's medical union, who says that approaches employed so far appear to be "monocultural" (Bartlett, 2020). It is an approach, which subsumed socio cultural factors such as differences in language, historical relationship to authority, and nonverbal communication styles, which in reality can shape how people respond to major disruption caused by pandemic. In response, this paper aims to highlight how everyday life and cultural practices inform responses to measures and message related to COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Methods

This paper builds on sense making analysis of data obtained through a village *WhatsApp* group platform since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rationales for and effects of different sense-making practices have been a subject of discussions amongst scholars for decades. Onuf (2013) and Wang and Zhang (2010) have outlined why and how sense making are determined by different notions of the root causes of problems confronting societies, the aims they aspire to attain and the actions required to achieve those in different ways. Eventually, it is actors' temporal and spatial settings, their interpretative frames, and their values and worldviews shape sense making practices. In the same manner, by building on the works others such as Weick *et al.* (2005), Harre *et al.* (1999) and Marková, Grossen, Linell and Salazar (2007), Jivet *et al.* (2020, p.2) highlight sense making as a concept that constitutes several elements: "Creativity, curiosity, comprehension, mental modeling and situation awareness."

However, for the purpose of this paper the author draws on the concept of sense-making as seen by Linner and Wibeck (2019, 2021) as a dialogical process. They suggest it to be "the cognitive and communicative processes through

which humans understand, describe and relate to phenomena" (Linner & Wibeck 2019, p.11). As a dialogical process, they assert that "sense making analysis benefits from integrating a focus on the content of communications with an analysis of communicative processes, noting the perceptions and understandings of different actors and how these perceptions are expressed, i.e., with which linguistic resources" (Linner & Wibeck 2021, p.2). The focal point will be the communicative processes, particularly views, lines of thought and perceptions expressed by different participants.

Their observations will be extended to the village of Pa Umur located in the state of Sarawak. In spite of its remoteness in Central Borneo, the mobile phones and smartphones have deeply penetrated the fabric of everyday life of the villagers. Similar to observations made by Tran *et al.*, (2015) who highlighted the rapid rise of mobile phones worldwide to overtake conventional landline infrastructure as the best possible platform for communication. As a closely knitted community, the ability to communicate is of great importance in Pa Umur. In order to maintain contacts between widespread members of the village, smartphones are the technology of their choice. This is to keep alive and reignite relationships in spite of the distances.

The pandemic has heightened the significance of smartphones as means for communication and for transmitting information. They become embedded in and constitutive of social relations both in the urban cities and in the rural villages. It has become an integral part of daily life and in fact, there is suggestion that the new social media platforms are the new forms of longhouses for they facilitated the maintenance and the strengthening of weak connections and affiliations of Pa Umur people as a result of rural-urban migration.

Like the rest of Malaysians (Bernama, 2017), *WhatsApp* is the village's main favourite platform for communication. Created on 3rd January 2015 by Dara Tigan and by August 2020 there are 85 participants on the walls. 11 persons

live permanent in the village while the rest are currently living in urban area – towns and cities in Malaysia and abroad. Media, links and docs (1,081 as at the time of this research) include photographs and videos – to relay information about events in the village, about a situation involving members of the village, about issues and concerns, which will have significant effects on the community and village. This includes sharing news of new births, weddings, birthday parties, promotions, fund raising, deaths and including village issues like land ownership and development. It is by analyzing the village-based narratives that we can understand how they made sense of the social distancing measures within their own cultural context and everyday life. As soon as the COVID-19 disease was announced as pandemic, the village WhatsApp became the most common source of COVID-19 related information with smartphones as the main device.

For the purpose of this paper, particular attention is given to the notion of collective sense making which was critical for galvanizing collective actions for outbreak management in the village. Collective sense making via chats on the *WhatsApp* became very crucial. To attain this, text analysis was used to analyse views, lines of thought and perceptions expressed by different participants and how these were expressed in the given situation through text and chat group conversations. As a method, the analysis involves understanding the language of the participants, symbols used or pictures found in the chat's text. This is to obtain information related to the society's understanding and delivery of life experiences under COVID-19 pandemic lockdown particularly.

To this end, an analysis was carried out by integrating three types of data; 1) data obtained from literature research, 2) newspaper and international and national media reporting on government policies and strategies to encounter the pandemic, 3) social media texts and particularly WhatsApp chats. The first two were carried out to provide a broad context. This is

important because more often the “message” in the chat will be easier to understand if its influence is based on the reflection of a large social structure and/or contextualised in historical or political context. By doing this the author understands the social structure in a broader context which is able to influence the message contained to be analysed. This is to uncover patterns, trends and insight from data in the forms of content and information produced on the chat wall. This becomes an important springboard to talk about issues affecting perceptions and experiences in the form of narratives, anecdotes and communication encountered on the *WhatsApp* wall. This level involved online research to screen and glean articles listed in Google Scholar and Mendeley databases and relevant other sites on the origin of COVID-19 and social distancing as a control and strategy and measure to curb its spread in different countries. Due to a great number of new papers being produced every day, attention was given to articles most relevant to Malaysia. In addition, news portals are consulted for archival materials due to the speed of publication at the present time. The third focuses on chat texts specifically on the Pa Umur village chat group. The aim here is to understand the way the participants use the chat room, their behaviours and their conversations on the channel. The social media is a window into the unprompted feelings and opinions of users from the village and those living outside the village.

To conform to the triangulation theory and increase confidence in the validity of results of studies, text analysis is also complemented with other sources of knowledge. As made obvious by Shah (2007, p.12) “a fieldworker who knows the community is better equipped to capture that reality.” This data is supplemented by empirical data drawn from the author's personal experiences growing up in the village of Pa Umur until 1985, and ethnographic knowledge, which the author has gathered through her frequent visits to the area because of research activities.

COVID-19 Outbreak and Social Distancing as A Global Response: A Brief Overview

Starting in Wuhan Hubei Province, China, COVID-19 disease has rapidly spread to other countries around the world. As of March 22, 2021, 213 countries and territories around the world have reported a total of 123,875,536 confirmed cases and death toll of 2,728,064 deaths (Worldometerinfo, 2020). With its expansive geographical spread and rapid infectious rate, for the past one year the world has embroiled in an unprecedented health crisis: With the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaring it as a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020 and classified it as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. In order to reduce the spread of the disease particularly in the absence of vaccine, a global effort to battle the outbreak was mounted by the World Health Organization who issued an operational guidance for maintaining essential health services during an outbreak (World Health Organization, 2020).

Since population densities and intensity of social contacts are deemed to increase SARS-CoV-2 high transmissibility, the WHO drew a checklist of measures to prevent the transmission of the virus from human to human, which revolve around the following activities: Surveillance and policing, community response, case management, and communication. Social distancing, quarantine and travel restrictions quickly became part of a new rapid response protocol to COVID-19 pandemic. However, as noted by Marroquin, *et al.* (2020) social distancing is considered the most prominent public response to COVID-19 pandemic and as a result it has become synonym to COVID-19. Aquino *et al.* (2020, p.2425) provides a good definition as to what is social distancing; it refers to measures aimed at reducing interactions within a community, which can include infected individuals as yet unidentified, hence not in isolation. Since diseases transmitted through respiratory droplet require a certain physical proximity for contagion to occur, social distancing aims to reduce transmissions.

Today almost all countries around the world have adopted social distancing guidelines and standard for global health mobilization with consistent key features: Staying at home, working from home (WFH) and avoiding social gathering. The World Health Organisation continues to monitor effects of the COVID-19 on essential health services and continues to provide practical guidance for national and sub national decision makers. For instance, it is its analysing and using routine data to monitor the effects of COVID-19 on essential health services: Practical guide for national and subnational decision-makers: Interim guidance, 14 January 2021 (World Health Organisation, 2021).

Social Distancing and Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia

Like most countries around the world, Malaysia adopted drastic effort to curb COVID-19 outbreak, which was first reported in the nation with the arrival of SARS-COV-2 on January 25, 2020 involving three Chinese nationals from Wuhan who entered the country via Singapore on 23 January 2020 (Hazlin Hassan, 2020). On 16th March 2020, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced a two-week partial national lockdown, known as movement control order (MCO) or *Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan* Malaysia, under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967 (Artida, 2020; Sukumaran, 2020). This was at the heel of the Ministry of Health Malaysia's first press statement made on 15th March 2020 to announce the 190 new COVID-19 cases in the country. The first nationwide lockdown was brought into order from 18th – 31st March 2020.

On March 25th, the first extension of the MCO to April 14th was broadcasted (Tee, 2020). By April 2020 Malaysia had recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia with 4817 cases and 77 deaths as of 13rd April 2020 (Nor Fazila Che Mat, Edinur, Abdul Razab and Safuan, 2020). The second extension was announced on April 10th for another fortnight until April 28th. On the night of 23rd April, the

Malaysian Prime Minister announced the third extension of the MCO to last until 12th May, with the possibility of further extensions. On the 7th of June, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced that the Conditional Movement Control Order would end on 9 June, with the country entering into the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) phase between 10 June and 31st August 2020. Nonetheless, the number of cases for COVID-19 continued to grow exponentially due to difficulties in establishing true and effective social distancing. In the Malaysian context, non-conformity to social distancing rules have been one of the main reasons for the rise of various COVID-19 clusters in the nation (Che Ghazali Norul Hajar *et al.*, 2021). In addition, there is a lack of access to information for a large part of the population regarding minimum infection prevention and control measures, including hand washing and respiratory etiquette. To further curb the spread of COVID-19, Malaysia's king had declared a nationwide state of emergency on January 12th, 2021 which could last until August 1, 2021. The national emergency is "to battle the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed as many people in the past two months as in the first 10 months of 2020 (Teoh, 2021)."

As described by Halimatus and Hayati (2020), Malaysia heeded lessons from affected countries and past epidemics with the guidance by WHO to mount a national response. This includes the issuing of guidance to the public on social distancing, respiratory etiquette, and hand hygiene. The types of measures and procedures implemented under the movement control order can be gleaned from a speech given by the Prime Minister on May 10th 2020. They are along the lines of four distinct social distancing measures available to health authorities: a) school closure; b) workplace closure and non-attendance; b) case isolation; d) reduced community-wide contact. This includes:

a. General prohibition of mass movements and gatherings across the country including religious, sports, social and cultural activities. All houses of worship and

business premises would be closed, except for supermarkets, public markets, grocery stores and convenience stores selling everyday necessities.

- b. Sanctions covered all Malaysians travelling abroad. For those who have just returned from overseas, they would be required to undergo a health check and a 14-day quarantine (or self-quarantine).
- c. Restrictions on the entry of all tourists and foreign visitors into the country;
- d. Closure of all kindergartens, government and private schools including day schools, primary and secondary, boarding schools, international schools, *tahfiz* centres, and pre-university institutions;
- e. Closure of all public and private higher education institutions (IPTs) and skills training institutes nationwide;
- f. Closure of all government and private premises except those involved in essential services (water, electricity, energy, telecommunications, postal, transportation, irrigation, oil, gas, fuel, lubricants, broadcasting, finance, banking, health, pharmacy, fire, prison, port, airport, safety, defence, cleaning, retail and food supply;
- g. Public health advice includes is the need to leave the house only for essential work, food shopping, caring for sick and vulnerable people and for medical treatment. When individuals leave the house, they are advised to keep a specific minimum distance from other people.

For obvious reasons, social gatherings are the main concern. For instance, more than 35% of the initial cases in Malaysia were identified to have originated from a mass gathering held in Sri Petaling between February 27, 2020 – March 1, 2020 (Yezli & Khan, 2020; Nor Fazila Che Mat, *et al.*, 2020). This has led to calls for the temporary closing of places of worship around the country.

In his speech titled *Perutusan Khas Perdana Menteri* the Prime Minister appealed to reduce activities outside their homes and to limit their movement by “*tidak perlu ke sana ke sini sekiranya tidak perlu.*” (Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia, 2020). He further explained that the virus is a silent enemy, which requires everyone to embrace and practice the new normal. Movements between states were prohibited, including the yearly practice of *balik kampung* (returning to the village) to celebrate Hari Raya. The cultural practice of “visit with neighbors” were only allowed with close neighbours and family members. As for social gatherings, he outlined that not more than 20 persons were allowed per gathering or meeting. He appealed to avoid close and small places, and to maintain distance when talking to visitors. To end his speech, he emphasized that all movement control order standard operation procedures (SOP) have to be adhered to.

On 2nd April 2020, Minister of Defence Ismail Sabri Yaakob reported that within two weeks 4,189 individuals had been arrested for flouting the movement control order. By the end of September 2020, the police had issued a total of 14, 957 compounds to premises, companies and individuals for breaking the MCO rules. A total of 21, 665 individuals had been arrested and charged to court (Code Blue, 2020).

Making Sense of Social Distancing in A Village WhatsApp Chat Group

The first mention of Covid-19 in the village *WhatsApp* platform took place on Sunday March 15th 2020. It was triggered by a post by one of the villagers who was currently residing in Marudi (a small town in the coast). He started by writing: “Good morning all lun Pumur”. This was followed by photos and videos of Sunday church service held at the village church.

In response, one of the users based in Kuching wrote in Kelabit: “Are you all not adhering to the request by the government to not carry out any gatherings within these few weeks?” Immediately after the

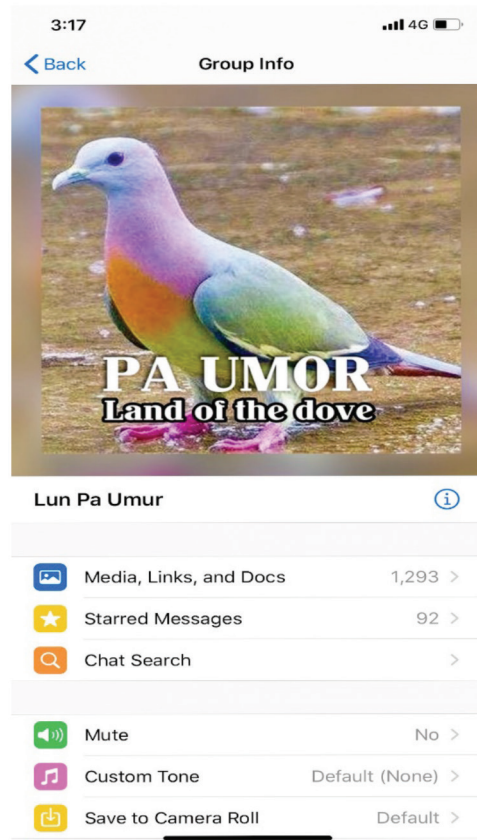


Figure 1: Village *WhatsApp*

statement, different users located in different places uploaded an avalanche of messages, videos, photographs and news about ongoing development of COVID-19. A circular from the church headquarters was posted on the village *WhatsApp* group to announce the cancellation of all church services and prayer meetings in lieu of the MCO announcement.

Around the same time, one of the participants in Holland posted: now the number of corona virus positive tests in the Netherlands rose to 1,135. Netherlands continues an ongoing battle to gain control over the spread of coronavirus. Additionally, restaurants, cafes, sports clubs, fitness centers, coffeeshops, clubs and saunas would also remain closed.

As the MCO begun to reorient their everyday life and practices, members of the

village negotiated and debated through online discussions and dialogues (in Kelabit) in order to make sense of the measures and message in a village setting. At times these came through the village yarns and tales. Questions and concerns were raised with regards how to reduce community contact which includes social distancing, isolation and quarantine. These are made clear in the following findings and discussions.

The first question raised was how to put into practice social distancing for individuals and families at home, particularly in a longhouse setting. The guidance on safe distancing of one meter apart between individuals has led to long exchanges of ideas and perspectives. How to translate the one meter measurement especially to those who are illiterate and elderly; how to make sure the distance is consistently observed. This is especially with regard to important daily social practice, for instance, when seated by the fire at the hearth to warm up especially in the morning. One way to beat back the cold weather early morning in the longhouses in Bario is to sit

by the hearth (fireplace) or in Kelabit “*sengiduh iring apui ngih puun tetel*”. It is a daily morning routine in the longhouses where members of the family will sit around the open fireplace to warm themselves. The following playful conversation reflects their effort to make sense of how to measure one meter when seated by the hearth.

Conversation 1:

Speaker 1: How? Can we still sit together by the fireplace to warm ourselves?
[*Kapeh, ken kerab narih peruyung sengiduh ngi tetel?*]

Speaker 2: That is a good question. Does the 1 meter distance apply? [*muned itun sinih leh. Jarak 1 meter apply?*]

Speaker 3: Hahaha Do take turn to sit by the fireplace [*Hahahaha siwa2 keh*]

Speaker 4: One person per corner of the hearth
[Each at four corners]

Speaker 5: Will the heat from the fire kill the virus?



Figure 2: A hearth (fireplace) in a home in Bario

The same question was raised with the cultural practice of social greetings in a longhouse setting. This was of a great concern because it is almost culturally unacceptable not to greet your next-door neighbours in the longhouses. Secondly, how do we measure the one meter distance when you do greet each other in the hallway?

Stay at Home Orders

The stay-at-home orders came into effect as soon as the Prime Minister announced it. The media actively spread the hashtag *#stayhome*. However, for those in the rural areas the urban biased policy has caused some confusion on a number of fronts. One, is the notion of home itself. It may have different meanings for different regions. In urban areas, a home is most likely limited to a house, however in rural areas a home can constitute the entire longhouse, or the whole village or even an entire mountain, highlands and it may include sites and places where they go to hunt, to fish and pick vegetables.

Within this, rural areas exhibit distinct cultural norms that govern their everyday perceptions and activities. There are cases for instance in Sabah where teenagers were caught and put in jail because they were playing *sepak takraw* within the confine of their village which they consider as part of their home. These villages are 40 kilometers from the closest urban areas.

Second, the stay-at home orders also changed their daily activities. In urban areas one person (the head of the household) from each of the household was allowed to leave the house for essential things like to buying food from the supermarket or a market. This gendered (Chakrabati, 2020) curfew policy to allowing only head of family out has other implications for rural areas.

Most rural areas do not access their daily sustenance from supermarkets. The closest will be a retail shop. However, in order to make sense of supermarket in the local setting, it was translated to mean the vast forest surrounding

the village, where men will go to hunt and fish. This is made clear by the following statement by a 47-year-old father on the village whatsapp platform: It is not great to go alone to our village supermarket (referring to the forest around the village) for it require us to walk for long hours to look for meat and food. At times, it takes the whole day (*Daat ayu tah uleng2, pelaba rayeh ditauh 'supermarket,' sampai berjam-jam shopping labo, siang malam*).

Moreover, in rural areas while men are expected to hunt in the forest, it is the women who go out often to the collect vegetables for daily consumption. They go to the riverbanks to collect ferns, to the forest to collect mushroom, bamboo shoots, spinach and others.

This reorientation has led to other questions such as: *Can we still go together to fish at the rivers and collect vegetables from the forest?* Do we have to do these chores on our own? These questions were raised in the contexts that women do go in groups to pick vegetables. This is for safety reasons. As noted by one woman who lives in the village: *What happened if a wild buffalo chases me?* In response, another lady from Miri replied, *"You would be probably return home empty handed."* Another participant interjected saying: *We now have to decide whether to be afraid of COVID-19 or the wild buffaloes roaming the forest."*

Another participant from Kuching wrote: *"Bario is relatively free from the pandemic. To go and pick up vegetables together should be okay but keep the distance in between one another just in case. I don't know if this could be discussed with the authority there. I mean you have two or three family members staying in the same house, sleeping and eating in the same house and cannot go and collect vegetables together where you can create more space and distances between each other. Probably should ask a condition that people of the same household could go together for such activities."*

Risks Perception and Fear

Another concern raised was translation of the movement restriction order to a village setting.

In Kelabit it was translated as “*Naam kerab lawe-lawe sembarangan*” which means don’t move around in the village anyhow. To a certain degree this has created confusion with regard to the link between moving around the village with the nature of the virus itself, which is first of all invisible.

There is no doubt that the novel threats of COVID-19 have caused fear, anxiety and confusion leading to paranoia that infected the society at large. This is compounded by the little understanding they have about the nature of the virus. In fact, some thought that the virus is like a bird that flies around to look for human bodies to attack. This has led to unnecessary fear of the unknown, and little understanding about why washing of hands is an important practice to stop the spread of the virus.

Discussions evolved round what people can do to protect themselves. This was particularly important for people who are vulnerable to stress and anxiety and reducing panic. With that, there was an attempt through the village discussions to frame the risk by contextualizing the invisible virus within frameworks considered familiar and meaningful by members of the village. There were three local terms that were used to frame the fear that virus has generated: water ghost (*menegge*), buffalo (*kerubau*) and the red eye ghost (*adaq sigung guruh siaq mateh*) and these are familiar things and notion which the villagers have weaved into thread of discussions. They are part of village tales about what they fear most. In fact, one participant described the virus as “the ghost of corona virus” (*adaq virus aet Coronyaaa*).

The fear of uncertainty and the invisibility of the virus are made akin to village folk stories and experiences with ghost. Here, since the virus is invisible it was described as a type of “ghost.”

Limit Visitors Into Homes Order

With that, the conversation evolved into “sealing of the village.” This entails to not accept strangers in your home. One of the participants posted a photo of a sign board being prepared

and erected to announce that no one was to enter the village without permission from the Headman. This was specifically for visitors who might travel on foot from East Kalimantan. The discussion *revolved* around what happened if they did come.

In response a participant posted: Good job. If they were to report to the headman, what was the protocol? Do they have a quarantine place to accommodate them in Pa Umor? Or would the police or authorized person come and pick them up for further action as self-distancing rule would not allow you to accommodate them in your house or bring them yourself to Bario?

In response the village decided to prepare a place for any visitors to stay overnight and to leave the village immediately the next day. It was posted that the same message had been sent by *WhatsApp* to relatives across the border.

A person who lives in the village sent a message saying: *I have just talked to the headman this morning, just in case there's a case of illegal entry on our side we should get ready a place for the visitors to stay overnight and leave home immediately the next day. Ketua Kampung (Headman) will discuss with Jawatankuasa Kebajikan dan Keselamatan Kampung soonest on this matter.*

The sealing of the village was strengthened through the enforcement of MCO by the police who prohibited movement of all vehicles. Announcement by the representative reads “starting from today 15/4 until 28/4 it is very strict and those caught moving/driving from upriver (including Bario, Lg Banga area, Tutoh and Ulu Baram areas to town and from town to Tutoh, Ulu Baram, Lg Banga & Bario) without permit from the local or nearest police station will be caught by Police and charged in Court. Punishment will be a fine of RM2000 or imprisonment for 6 months or both. Please inform all vehicle owners and drivers who use to travel between town and Ulu areas to comply strictly with the PKP and not to travel without any police permit.”



Figure 3: Sealing off the village

Enforcement of MCO Measures

Question of policing during the COVID-19 pandemic was also raised. This is especially with regard to who is responsible to ensure measures are taken seriously. Recommended policies appear to be more applicable to larger urban and suburban areas but quite difficult to apply in rural setting. For instance, there were questions such as do “we have to wear masks in the forest? Will the police catch and summon us if we don’t wear masks while fishing?”

There are other complications too. For instance, the longhouse as a home and as a place of living can be crowded. Often times there are multigenerational households with shared bathrooms. Will these traditional arrangements hamper self-isolation and social distancing?

One important related concern raised was question of who and how to implement the orders? In response one participant from the village responded: *The MCO order was announced in the village church and that it will be enforced by the Police.* Another replied from Singapore saying: *Yes, that is how it should be. Over here we can only walk or go out with those from the home. And we need to wear masks and to keep one meter distance from strangers/ friends you bump into. If you get caught by the police walking together, the police will come to your home to check whether or not you are from the same household.*

Yet another replied: I prefer to do things procedurally. With the headman’s permission and conditions. Come up with conditions on how to move around in the village. Do not post photographs anyhow on the social media.

A young man in his 30’s replied: *The main idea is to obey the MCO’s “Social distancing” and “cleanliness” requirements at all times, regardless of whether you stay home alone or leave your house with another person. Let’s listen to the experts, doctors and our government. Stay calm and do our part & continue to pray for each other.”*

The roles of the headman were highlighted to be paramount. This was made clear by the following post: The Kampung Folks in Pumur have been briefed by *Ketua Kampung* on Sunday last week after he attended a meeting with the Senior Administration Officer (SAO) of Bario, Councilor, Head of Police (*Ketua Polis Daerah Bario*) and Headmen of Pa’ Ukat and Pa’ Lungan. Those from Pumur or outsiders must apply for permit from *Ketua Polis Daerah Bario* when one needs to move in and out of Bario central, the shops and the airport.

The post also stated the following: *He [the headman] has volunteered to take the risk as the village “dispatcher/transporter.” This is in order to reduce movement of villagers in and out of the village to buy goods. However, since*

he is considered more vulnerable to the disease due to his age, we suggested for him to appoint someone who is much younger below 30 years old, and who is daring with a sound mind to take on that role as the village transporter.”

Besides the police and the headman, the roles of the local church and community leaders and village RELA (the People's Volunteers Corps) were instrumental to ensure measures were taken seriously. The following announcement posted on the village whatsapp platform spells this out clearly.

“Enforcement of PKP Phase 3 starting from today 15/4 until 28/4 is very strict and those caught moving/driving from Ulu (including Bario, Long Banga area, Tutoh and Ulu Baram areas to town and from town to Tutoh, Ulu Baram, Long Banga and Bario) without permit will be caught by Police n charged in Court. Punishment will be fined Rm2k or imprisonment for six months or both. Please inform all vehicle owners n drivers who use to travel between town n Ulu areas to comply strictly with the PKP and not to travel without any police permit.”

The announcement was titled as Bario MCO. With it, local interpretation and application of Red Zone did not necessarily carry the national meaning. According to the Ministry of Health, there are three categories of COVID-19 zones: While the green zones have no active case, the yellow zones have one to 40 cases and the red zones are districts with at least 41 active cases. However, unlike in the urban areas, the zones were defined based on possible movements in and out of certain villages in Bario. For this purpose, three villages – Pa Lungan, Pa Ukat and Pa Umur - were declared as “red zone” not because of the number of cases, but simply because of their locations which are very close to the border with East Kalimantan, Indonesia (Amster & Lindquist, 2005; Bala, 2001), and with the possible existence of “*jalan tikus*”

(mouse paths). For the purpose of monitoring, five RELA members were appointed by the village to monitor closely movement in and out of the villages.

Conclusion

This paper highlights that as nations around the world continue to grapple with the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, there is a wide variation in the response and use of recommended safety measures to slow the spread of disease. A sense making analysis of village narratives, lines of thoughts and discussions provide insights into how and why this has been the case. Using the case of Pa Umur Village in the Kelabit Highlands, it provides a socio-cultural understanding as to how local communities could make sense of the COVID-19 health crisis and what factors had shaped their emergency responses and actions.

The case of Pa Umur village suggests that the first step in pandemic control in remote communities is to prevent introduction of disease into the communities. This requires effective communications to contain the COVID-19 pandemic by emphasizing contextualized messages. For instance, guidance needs to be adapted to local settings in order to be culturally appropriate and relevant. Similar situation was found to be the case in Zimbabwe (Mackworth-Young, *et al.*, 2020). It was discovered that there is a need for public health messages on behavioural change to be adapted to suit different community groups.

A well-tailored message that takes into account the cultural perceptions, lines of thoughts and belief systems of its audience should be more effective compared to one that does not. A clear communication and culturally sensitive translation will ensure that public health interventions are not only locally relevant but will create awareness and understanding on how to respond quickly. As emphasized by Williams (2020), in order to stay clear and stay safe, the public needs to be familiar with and identify with the guidance on safe distancing.

Conversely little understanding of the disease especially amongst communities can lead to precarious lives. A good example is the idea that the virus is like an invisible bird that flies around looking for a human body to make a nest and destroy it in the process. This has led to unnecessary fear or even indifference amongst certain quarters. On the other hand, a deeper understanding on the part of the community about risks can strengthen core capacities at the community level. This may lead to individual and collective empowerment on health issues. As can be seen from this paper, a sustained leadership supported by partnership with state and federal government can enable community leaders to develop community-based disease surveillance protocols, strategies and framework.

This leads to the final point which is a good grasp of community beliefs, practices, and solutions will go a long way in terms of designing policies and procedures which are relevant and implementable to differing realities on the ground. In the case of Pa Umur, the urban biased social distancing measures have reoriented their daily activities and social practices. In order to make sense of the disruption, they drew on their shared experiences and village narratives to forge a way forward to formulate a framework which is feasible, acceptable, relevant and effective to their rural situation and their longhouse culture, lifestyle and survival strategies. These local strategies are important to consider as means to cope with the constant threat of re-emergence of COVID-19.

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