

Sharing Meal, Sharing Life together:

An Anthropological Perspective on the Significance of Sharing Meal Ritual Based on the Religious Life

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Abstract— The article examines the role and existence of sharing meal ritual. At least, so to speak, there are two functions of the ritual, i.e. on the one hand, as a cultural strategy to maintain social cohesion. On the other hand, it reflects differences within the community which potential for conflict. Differences and commonalities might be regarded as a dynamic and complex process within a community. The sharing meal ritual contains varying materials and ideals of societal life, which can be seen collectively both through actual and symbolic meanings. The meanings emerge from social ideas and undergoing through their daily societal life, which influence and have been influenced by their view in order to manage a common living space. These complexities of meal tradition need to be explored to be understood.

Keywords— *sharing meal, cultural strategy, Maluku Island*

I. INTRODUCTION

How does human being create meaning for the relationship in their life and create a civilization? One activity through which people thinking and practice it is having a meal together. Meal tradition becomes window in order to understand people's mind behind their practice. It contains cultural investment. All human cultures and or religious tradition have meal tradition. It has been a basic biological need, and also referred to the relation among people from local to global environment, from family to broader society. It is enhancing the complexity of human culture.

Living the tradition of world religions side by side with prime religions in the Asian context, I realize that meal tradition has shown important role. For instance, in Christian tradition, meal relates to the sacrament of Holy Communion. At the same time, all Asian communities have meal traditions. Those rituals practiced in local religion have not only used meal tradition as an instrument but also as basic principle and practice. It means, when we talk about religion, including on God, life, world and community, it will make us, get involved with material symbols comes from such tradition like this.

In Indonesia, every local society has a certain name for their meal traditions. Let say, *Makan Patita* in Maluku, *Megibung* in Bali and Lombok, *Makan Basamo* in West Sumatera, etc. It is practiced both in more homogenous community and inter-community. This kind of tradition has been the central place for developing multidimensional life. It contains strong religiosity

and social action where we can see management of life in it. On that ritual, one can acknowledge the power relations by identifying positions of "us" and "them", the role of parents, the role of children, practice for preparing stuffs, implementation and reflection in ritual of meal. It reflects the management of society based on the pattern in it. Every ritual links with the idea of social management. It means that even though some cultures have similar pattern of meal tradition, we should look at the detail situation in the society for certain variant of social relation will be there. Its cultural patterns both and variants in social reality have been important for developing a sort of contextual education. Concern on doing contextual education requires understanding on how people manage their relationship in everyday life and also symbolizes from and for a dynamic meal tradition. In this paper, I limit it to the more general significance of meal tradition.

II. METHODOLOGY

This article is based on anthropological field research in several local communities in Maluku whose practices of sharing meal together namely *Makan Patita*. The cultural practice of *Makan Patita* is regarded as common activities nowadays. The recent generation of Maluku people are using the term *makan patita* to refer to getting meal together. However, according to my observation, this kind of meal together actually has some fundamental cultural notions and sociological function that hidden behind the recently cultural practices and interpretations.

This research is using two research approaches, namely literature review and field research. Selected academic papers and books will be compared and critically reading. Through this approach, I am going to test several perspectives pertinent to cultural practices of meal together in some communities, and attempt to discover the basic paradigm that base such practices and insights.

Secondly, the field research is conducted in several local communities (urban and rural). Data are structured from an ethnographic project that explored daily practices, languages, rituals and social spheres that reflected basic cultural understanding of those communities.

The steps of research should be mentioned here: a) collecting literatures about the research project. b) composing

research design. c) conducting participatory observation; d) systematizing data; e) analyzing data needed for research. e) evaluating and eliminating data according to data classified. f) conclusion and hypothesis. By describing data as research scope and aim, comparing data one and another and scrutinize according to researcher reflection and last making a reflection to give an interpretation to seek the meaning and value of traditions in sharing meal together of Makan Patita in Maluku [1].

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Meal Tradition from Anthropological Perspective

There are some components of the meal tradition. The first activity is eating. "Eat" is a biological basis activity and also cultural activity. This human need has been pushing people to understand their living environment by creating activity and goods by cooking the raw materials. Then, "eat" is not only an individual business, but more social activity. Eating together is social action in society.

In the "eating together" activity, people comes together not only to enjoy the meal but also exchange ideas and experiences. It becomes a space to share more than food. Meals also feed the relationship. Eating together becomes a "feast" that narrated as a customs. The custom is transmitted from generation to generation. Some of the customs established through its community's history as tradition". As tradition, some activities of eating together legitimated as a "sacred" in terms of its function to maintain social cohesion and/or social integration.

So, meal tradition contains a multi-dimensional human culture such as history, genealogies, sociological and economic enterprises. Through reviewing literatures and some researches, it demonstrates that meal tradition according to food sharing, fiesta, social reorganization and exchange. This practice binds each participant (individual or collective) into a circle of "contract" and "obligation" [2].

In other words, it contains cultural strategy to address and managing relations at individual and communal levels, on class social, famine, food security, the dynamic of preserving food (hunting, farming, industry, etc.).

Another important component is the food. In its material existence, food relate to human beings in all aspect of life; physic, social and spiritual. The food accompanies human being in doing their civil function. It has also become a communication system in the society. It communicates units in society, both vertical and also horizontal scheme. The food has being medium of social interaction among people in some extent. Food is being used to celebrate social event, defining social categories in society and also confirm value in society. Human cultural investment can be found in food [3].

It will visible in the selection of food, structure of the menu, occasion and time. Food able to be a symbol of entity of certain groups, have cultural values, as an area of social action to manifest and expressing something in according to social change and also social integration [4].

The relation among the participants bring out the meaning. The code deciphered in the taste, menu and its implementation [5].

Using the same menu in certain rite will bring back the memory and bonding between the participants with those came before and will come after them. It includes relation with the transcendent (God). The people often can detect identity of one community by knowing certain food, their history, politics, economics and other aspect reality. Local food has in its term, some dimensions of place and space of community. The traditional local food plays a potential role for strengthening and stabilizing social tight to maintain their history [6]. The tension between local and global also operate to local food, however in many cases, globalization process has not able to remove it. Instead, local has a moment of rebirth or reconstruction.

Meal tradition, as part of culture is "the stories people tell about themselves" about hidden meaning in it [7]. Food always links with celebrations and make deeper meaning for the occasion it involved. Food transmitted from generation to generation, and by doing it, people preserve tradition which link effectively the past and now.

Another component in meal tradition is cooking. Levi Strauss have seen cook as a language where structure of society underlined. Elyada explains "the act of cooking is perceived by Lévi-Strauss as a type of anomalous category since food constantly crosses the boundaries of the categories nature and culture." By cooking, people have shown intellectual of society to maintain its group. Cooking has been a huge project of human being that processed the social convention in society. The activity of cooking determines what food is and what is not/forbid to say as food, type of food what occasion according to the certain food, and so on. It means also that human stomach digest rather a cultural than a physical basis needs. It refers to model of relationship that recognize in certain society such as relations of opposition, complementation, or symmetry. The effect of that condition, one time the barrier of "us" and "them" can be blurred but another time can see strictly. Besides that, influence each other and tendering to the hegemony visible in this context, both because of reproducing of tradition from the past and contemporary problem that produce a new model of society.

In the recent discourse about meal tradition, food and food ways has been shown that food slowly became a way to look at global issues (and vice versa). In the modern society, it relates to the modern world orientation. The global economy has been dominated societal life. The commercial mass-food industry, media, phenomena of urbanormativity and the patriarchal system supported this trend. Industries treat people as target of the market of their profit oriented [8].

However, the meal tradition still seeing as space where people's identity can be displayed. In the case of modern society, they display their identity by showing their demand as a consumer. And also people act as an active consumer. By doing so, the central place for meal has been shifting to the new place such as a restaurant. The restaurant functions not only as a place to produce and distribute fast food, but also become a social space for people displayed identity and or recognized

their status to some extent. Then fast food industry connects the eater with natural surroundings, but in a new way.

B. Meal Tradition and the Construction of Religious Values

Meal tradition has correlated to meaning construction process in religious life. It includes understanding about God, the world and life. It is impossible to understand religious life by denying food. At least there are two sides in it, as part of make people united but on another side show the boundary based on what food allow or forbid. Robin Fox states that "Because of its centrality in our lives, food becomes a perfect vehicle for ritual, and food rituals become central to most religions; food taboos mark off one sect or denomination from another" [9]. From another direction that complementary with the previous direction, as Elizabeth Moran said: "Not only were foods transformed in ritual performances through either a physical or symbolic metamorphosis, but the rituals themselves were transformative because of the use of food" [10].

The Holy Communion might be named as one important tradition in Christian life. It unites people for some level at the same time it segregates them for another level. The complexity inside the meal tradition interpreted by people with other means so that the Holy Communion set there interact with another perception. For instance, the perception about the church which has calling to unite people but also has consequence to let people create their own church space based on their interpretation about church itself.

Another aspect is eating with God and have meal with God. This kind of meal tradition go beyond sacred and secular area but combine it. Food and drink is the component of relationship between God and God's creation. The ascetic ritual of meal tradition in Christian community transformed by these elements. It then helps religious community's imagination about their obligation in the world, about God's self in real-material life and about life. At the same time, it attributes religious practice of community to create such a civilization time to time.

C. Women Role

Many aspects of traditional role of women have been shown in the meal tradition. This important tradition of women role has marginalized by modern society. Modern society then produce meal tradition under modern philosophy. It places women on the margin and their role removes systematically instead replace by modern culinary industry.

The hegemony spread everywhere through so many ways. On the other side, women have doing what they think it useful for not only for themselves but also for all. Instead of respect to that women tradition, the modern culture continues to push society to follow their paradigm of surplus and fixing entity.

On the other side, there are examples that women continuing to create meaning by cooking and prepare meal tradition in many rituals. For instance, through cooking activities and rising children, Tortugas women passing the local narrative as a form resistant towards assimilation. When they cook or prepare the ritual, together with other women, they continue supporting

network to the reconstructing of the boundary of community [11].

In Central Maluku, women continue their roles to prepare food for ritual of *Makan Patita* by accompanying male participants. Notwithstanding that role domesticated by broader society, what they have done really support that community to exist. The aspect that differentiates that role from culinary enterprise is that they create links of the future to the past by doing such rite in the reality of people today by no means of instrumentality as such.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

There are aspects for doing theology such as:

First: We can see that eating display as a code of messages about many aspects of human being such as religion, identity, gender, security and economy. At the same time, the sociologists point out eating as one important component in the making and remaking of social identities. As a basic need of human being, eating become of starting point for human to produce and reproduce its culture. With another word, society formed by considering every material culture that they created and using for their life. People's life composed by various sources such as old culture, global culture, national culture, prime religious culture, contemporary religious phenomena, global economy, changing of environment condition and dynamic people on move and also technology. Doing theology on how to life meaningfully in community or communities, put culture of eating as one of central concern. It helps to understand arena of human life with everyday activity in which culture produced, including religious life. Eat is a routine and existential activity contains in its nature, the sense of hope, caring, love, faith and strategy to build life. By sensitive to the connection among these aspects of human life, theology will be an inclusive area of human to build home together.

Second: Food and food habits play important roles in the human relationships. On one time, it unifies human being, and another time it useful as a marker of social boundaries. It influences for raising many problems in human life. There are examples that in conflict areas, the reconciliation could be reached by putting foods between them. Another data shows that even when the world grows smaller and communication more immediate, perhaps we can look at toward a greater homogenization of food habits. However, until now we experience that ethnic identity is not yet blurred and the world is in an existing state of mixing, mingling and transferring tastes. What happened nowadays is that about shifting of understanding on what primary on food and eating introduced by global culture. Accordingly, the research on various food-involved traditions that will have to understanding people's relationship and the trend of global culture. Ethical issues appear in this case. So, to manage relationship among human being with this kind of disparity need time to search together. In the reality of people who live side by side as a global residents, issues of respect and justice are there. Understanding food habits of certain community, protect food security of people, and develop critical thinking towards the aggressive approach in global food industry can be the agendas for religious community and religious education in doing theology

according to life together. Also, by understanding these situations, intervention for better relationship among human being and human-nature can be effective.

Third: Traditional meal tradition still exist even though those who participate in it more heterogeneous than in the past. One factor that makes it exist is that food contains something that cannot change and be replaced easily. If it changes then it will change many of cultural aspects of society. Transform of meal tradition can be a window to understand real situation of human being. It contains innovation and struggle of people. Meal tradition has shown spirituality, principle, concern, dilemma, structure, negotiation and other aspects of society. The correlation between function of theology and the source of theology can be bridged by studying meal tradition in communities.

Fourth: Doing Religious Education has to go beyond the black and white feature composition and binary opposition model in a certain paradigm of theology or religious education. It is because of the dynamics and even conflict process of human activity. In eating, cooking and meal tradition, human being has been shown that phenomenon. There are always spaces around that two main area in human cognition. According to that complexity, issues on migration, hospitality of local people, consumer, interfaith dialog, peace, gender, ecology, and so on also able to reveal it. The awareness on the complexity of human effort as shown in meal tradition has been important to doing theology on contextual ecclesiology. Internally, by doing that, the dialogue between Christian tradition particularly from biblical text and real life of people nowadays can come up with useful recommendation. Externally, Christian community gradually rethink about relation among creation wisely.

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